

Naveen Patnaik

ଓଡ଼ିଶା ଶିକ୍ଷକ ସଂଗଠନ



# Naveen Patnaik

Ruben Banerjee

 juggernaut

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*To my late father, Tara Pada Banerjee  
Baba, I know you would have been very proud*

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# Introduction

## From Socialite to Satrap

‘Hi, I am Naveen,’ said the tall, lean, middle-aged man in jeans and T-shirt, extending his hand for a warm handshake.

The year was 1988 and the setting Konark, the seaside resort not far from the more famous temple town of Puri in Odisha, then spelt ‘Orissa’. A British adventurer, Mark Shand, was set to embark on a thousand-odd-kilometre journey from Konark to Sonapur in neighbouring Bihar on an elephant, creating a buzz and drawing a motley crowd to Konark.

I was there as a guest of the private secretary of Biju Patnaik, the leader of the opposition in the Odisha legislature. In power or out of power, Biju Babu commanded tremendous respect. Gour Mohan Sarangi, his private secretary, also had a fair amount of clout.

Sarangi and I were lounging around on the lawns of the Konark inspection bungalow, whiling away our time since Shand was late in showing up with his elephant. Other guests were also gathered in small groups across

the well-manicured lawns, generally killing time. Spotting Sarangi, A.U. Singh Deo, a prominent politician and member of the erstwhile royal family of Bolangir in western Odisha, walked towards us, followed by the man in jeans and T-shirt.

Sarangi knew who the man was. I didn't. 'Meet Naveen, Biju Babu's son,' Sarangi said, turning to me. I introduced myself as a newspaper reporter and greeted the man. Naveen, then forty-two years old, gave a toothy smile and we shook hands. Though struck by his pedigree – Biju Babu had two sons and a daughter, Naveen being the youngest – I didn't make much of the chance meeting. We parted company a minute or so later, training our attention instead on Shand, who had arrived by then.

Looking back, I think I cannot be faulted for taking the fortuitous meeting lightly. Biju Babu's family generally stayed in the background, away from the public gaze. Occasionally, his wife, Gyan Patnaik, would make an appearance beside the imposing, six-foot-tall politician, who left a deep imprint in the state, both during his life and after. But more often than not, Gyan Patnaik, when seen in public, would only be a silent spectator, while Biju Babu held court. His children were rarely seen.

Biju Babu's children – eldest child Prem, daughter Gita and Naveen – lived mostly outside Odisha. Naveen lived in his father's privately owned New Delhi residence in the tony neighbourhood of Aurangzeb Road, now A.P.J. Abdul Kalam Marg. They visited their father back home in Bhubaneswar, the capital of Odisha, from time to time, but the family visits were invariably low-key.

Since Biju Babu's children only had a peripheral role, no one at Konark showed any interest in Naveen. No one crowded around him or sought to grab his attention. To his credit, Naveen kept to himself and betrayed none of the starry tantrums normally associated with children of the famous and the powerful. At that time, no one in Odisha or elsewhere could have imagined that Biju Babu's younger son was destined to outshine his illustrious father.

But almost a decade after Shand undertook his epic elephant journey, those of us who had been somewhat dismissive of Naveen in Konark were forced to take note of him. I, for one, had the onerous task of chasing him for news reports. A political nonentity, Naveen was catapulted into the limelight following his father's death in 1997. Circumstances forced him to plunge into politics, where he set new records, even bettering the achievements of his distinguished father. Consider this – for all his fame, Biju Babu had only short stints in power. His political career spanned some fifty years, but the legendary leader was in power for less than ten years in all. He was the chief minister of Odisha for about two years in the early 1960s. After spending a long spell in the wilderness thereafter, he next tasted power in the late 1970s, when a disparate opposition under Jayaprakash Narayan ousted Indira Gandhi from the Centre. Biju Babu was the union minister of steel and mines in the Janata government for a little over two years before the country got tired of the Janata Party and the government fell under the weight of its own contradictions. Biju Babu himself continued

to be a powerful regional player, but held no executive post until 1990, when he again became the chief minister. He remained in office until the completion of his term in 1995.

But unlike his father's roller-coaster ride, Naveen's political journey has only seen an upward trajectory. Having joined politics, Naveen quickly became a member of Parliament (MP) after winning the Lok Sabha by-election to Aska constituency in 1997, the seat his father had won in 1996, and then got re-elected to Parliament twice in quick succession, first in March 1998 and then again in October 1999. When the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee came to power in 1998, Naveen became a union minister. He remained a union minister when Vajpayee took oath as prime minister again the following year. He then set his sights on Odisha and when elections were held in the state in 2000, he swept the polls and became chief minister.

Eighteen years later, India and the world are different places altogether. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the United States invaded Afghanistan and later Iraq. Osama bin Laden is dead and gone. The US invasions redrew power structures in the Middle East, triggering civil wars, many of which continue to rage today. There have been popular uprisings, described as the Arab Spring, in many countries. The 2008 global crisis unrecognizably changed the economic and financial landscape and the international pecking order, leading to the meteoric rise

of China and the tarnishing of the image and power of the United States.

India too changed considerably in between. The NDA led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was voted out in 2004 and replaced by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), which had the grand old Congress party at the helm. It lorded over the country's destiny for ten years until a groundswell of popular disenchantment swept it aside and propelled a new force called Narendra Modi to the top job of prime minister in 2014.

Various states of the Indian Union also witnessed regular changes in the interim. In Kerala, the Congress and the Left alternated in power, while in Tamil Nadu J. Jayalalithaa (or her proxy) and her long-time rival M. Karunanidhi took turns to rule the state. In West Bengal, the thirty-four-year rule of the Communists was finally ended by the tempestuous Mamata Banerjee, who swept the polls, threatening the Left Front with political extinction. Barring Gujarat, Sikkim and to an extent Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, which witnessed the emergence of local political satraps such as Shivraj Singh Chouhan and Raman Singh, most other states were rocked by intermittent political tumult. The Bahujan Samaj Party's Mayawati's word was law in Uttar Pradesh until Akhilesh Yadav replaced her as the chief minister. Then five years later, Yadav himself was replaced by Yogi Adityanath of the BJP. Political power has also regularly changed hands in states such as Maharashtra and Karnataka.

On the economic front as well, there have been sea changes. To give just one example, the Sensex which hovered around 4000 in the year 2000 is today trading around 35,000 and shows an upward bias.

Odisha, however, has stayed constant, with Naveen continuing uninterrupted as chief minister and looking good for a fifth term. Unlike many other chief ministers who were felled by anti-incumbency after winning landslide victories in their states, Naveen has bucked the trend. He has already won three re-elections. Besides winning assembly polls, he has come out on top in almost every election, from parliamentary to panchayat polls. Even in 2014, when the Modi wave swept across the length and breadth of the country, it made no dent in the land that Naveen rules. In fact, he improved on the previous tally of his Biju Janata Dal (BJD) in the assembly elections. In the Lok Sabha, his BJD won twenty of the twenty-one seats in the state, proving that, for the time being at least, he is invincible.

All this and more make Naveen a remarkable phenomenon. Taciturn by nature, Naveen has no parallel in Indian politics. Unlike other politicians, who love to be in the headlines, he is rarely seen on prime-time television, and heard even less. He is perhaps the quietest politician in present-day India, never raising his voice and creating the least din. Even back home in Odisha, which has repeatedly elected him chief minister, there is an information deficit about him. People know the basic details of his social life before he entered politics in 1997, courtesy some of his journalist friends, but little else.

Journalist Tavleen Singh's book *Durbar* is replete with references to a younger Naveen who went party-hopping with her and was a permanent feature in Delhi's cocktail circuit. Singh recounts an episode when a young Naveen asks Sonia Gandhi at a party if she was wearing clothes made by Valentino, the Italian couturier. Renowned editor-journalist Vir Sanghvi, in an article several years ago, wrote on Naveen's lifestyle and the reputation he had come to acquire as a perfect host. Naveen's Delhi home, Sanghvi wrote, was a cultural melting pot, where the high and mighty, the rich and famous – and the not-so-famous – gathered routinely. Among his guests were Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones, actress Koo Stark, who once dated Prince Andrew of Britain, and Bruce Chatwin, the famous travel writer and novelist.

Though Naveen lived mostly away from the public gaze, his social contacts were the talk of the town and Sanghvi wrote about the visit of a Robert to Naveen's home. One of Naveen's foreign acquaintances apparently called up one day to ask if he could host a friend who would pass through India shortly. Naveen said yes and the person, who identified himself as Robert, came and stayed with him for a few days. It was only when the person left that it came to light that he was none other than the Hollywood superstar Robert De Niro.

Such stories, combined with the chief minister's reticence – he rarely gives interviews and barely socializes these days – have given him an aura of mystery. People seem to like him but know precious little about him. There is practically no one who knows him intimately, at least

not in Odisha today, prompting some to compare him with Greta Garbo, the Swedish-born American actress whose mystique deepened after she turned a recluse on retirement.

A recluse or not, there is only one other politician in power in India today who has been chief minister longer than Naveen: Pawan Chamling, the chief minister of the mountainous state of Sikkim since 1994. Manik Sarkar, the chief minister of Tripura since 1998, was also ahead of Naveen until March 2018 when the BJP dislodged his Communist Party of India (Marxist) – CPM – government.

If Naveen wins the 2019 elections, he could break the record of Jyoti Basu, the celebrated communist who ruled West Bengal for twenty-three years, from 1977 to 2000.

But it isn't only his longevity that has given Naveen the status of a living legend. Politics, by and large, is a sordid, murky and fiercely competitive affair. It is a treacherous vocation where everyone is out to pull everyone else down by any means, fair or foul. The world of politics in Odisha is no different: it was, in fact, the first state in the country where an elected people's representative switched political allegiances after winning at the polls. One Bira Kishore Behera changed sides and joined the Independent Party of a local maharaja after being elected on a Congress ticket from Jajpur district in the provincial elections during British times in 1937, thereby setting into motion a practice that came to be later decried as the politics of the 'Aaya Ram, Gaya Ram' kind.

Surviving such a cut-throat political set-up is no



easy task. Naveen was a political novice in 1997, with little knowledge of the state. His pedigree and powerful surname did give him a head start, but to sustain the momentum for close to two decades, consolidating his hold on the state, going from strength to strength, is no mean achievement. From a greenhorn, he has evolved into a regional satrap.

Remarkably, when he first took over as chief minister, he spoke no Odia. At rally after rally, ahead of the 2000 assembly elections, a somewhat sheepish Naveen went around telling the crowds that he would take time to pick up the local language – ‘*Mote bhala Odia kahiba paen tike samay lagiba*’ – before switching over to reading from a pre-written speech in Hindi. Imagine Mamata Banerjee seeking to become the Bengal chief minister without speaking Bengali, or Nitish Kumar becoming the Bihar chief minister without knowing a word of Bhojpur. Or for that matter, Narendra Modi hoping to lead Gujarat, as he did for over twelve years before becoming the prime minister, without knowing Gujarati.

The jury is still out on whether Naveen has delivered on the hope he gave people and lived up to expectations. Odisha still makes news for the wrong reasons. Children in the state’s outlying areas are malnourished, poverty is rampant and corruption, critics say, is endemic. Despite long years of Naveen at the helm, Odisha’s enduring image is that of deprivation and distress. The long-standing chief minister has given the state stability, but his opponents say he has failed miserably in bringing succour to the people he rules.

Whatever his achievements or failings, it cannot be denied that Naveen has scripted a spectacular success story. Having had nothing to do with politics for the first fifty years of his life, he transformed himself into a consummate politician once he decided to take the plunge. In the process, he stole a march over other political dynasts in the country. While Rahul Gandhi is still struggling to stand up and be counted even fifteen years after he joined politics, M.K. Stalin, M. Karunanidhi's son, is still biding his time and Akhilesh Yadav, the son of the Samajwadi Party patriarch Mulayam Singh Yadav, is out of favour after just one five-year stint as the Uttar Pradesh chief minister. Others such as Sachin Pilot and Jyotiraditya Scindia are yet to realize their full potential as heirs to the legacy of their prominent fathers.

Some say Naveen has politics in his genes even though it had lain dormant for decades. When the opportunity finally presented itself after his father's demise, he simply outdid others with a mix of shrewdness and stealth – qualities that he inherently possessed. But the Odisha chief minister also owes a part of his political success to the state's disappointing political past. For decades before his arrival, the state seemed adrift on hopelessness. Politicians played their inane games ceaselessly and scandals erupted at regular intervals. When Naveen stepped forward to stake claim to his father's legacy, Odias, neck-deep in misery, responded wholeheartedly. It was as if the quest for collective redemption, an attempt to retrieve trust, integrity and morality that were in short

supply in public life, had begun in right earnest with Naveen's arrival.



I had a taste of the muck that dominated Odisha politics within hours of my arrival in the state for the first time, way back in 1987, when the paan-chewing man with stained teeth, sitting behind the small desk at the chief minister's official residence, said, '*Asila? Asa.*'

Less than ten hours old in Bhubaneswar, I was stumped by the words. I struggled to make sense of what the slightly balding man was saying. Or why he was saying it.

The words in Odia seemed somewhat similar to my mother tongue, Bengali, which helped me roughly translate what the man said into 'So you have come? Come.' The man seemed to have been expecting me and was welcoming me inside. Obviously, he had mistaken me for someone else. But before I could fully comprehend what he had said, he spoke up again. '*Ratri egaratare asiba*' (Come at eleven at night) he said, this time with a suggestive half-smile.

Since my arrival that morning as the state correspondent of the *Indian Express* newspaper, I had been caught up in a virtual whirlwind. Bhubaneswar was known to be a balmy place, where a cool breeze invariably blew across the leafy, tree-lined city, but the political temperatures had been rising and the city was divided, with battle lines drawn between loyalists of the

chief minister, J.B. Patnaik (no relation of Biju Babu or Naveen), and his rivals.

J.B. Patnaik's detractors within the ruling Congress party were demanding his dismissal and I had arrived just when yet another bout of dissidence was threatening to unseat the normally unflappable chief minister. Disgust at the political classes, including the chief minister, was at an all-time high in the aftermath of a damning cover story that the now-defunct *Illustrated Weekly of India* had run in May 1986 on the alleged sexual escapades of J.B. Patnaik.

The story portrayed J.B. Patnaik as a modern-day Caligula, the notorious Roman emperor known for his mood swings and testosterone-driven orgies. The *Illustrated Weekly* quoted men and women giving details of Patnaik's sexual preferences and how they were enticed to be at his service. The chief minister was shown to be a 'deviant'. The allegations levelled were serious, but far from conclusive. J.B. Patnaik doggedly denied the charges and took the magazine to court. Unable (or unwilling) to back up the allegations, the *Illustrated Weekly* was forced to apologize. But by then the damage had been done and the chief minister's image and standing had been severely dented. Party rivals wanted him dismissed and senior Congress leader Uma Shankar Dixit was at Bhubaneswar to mediate between the warring pro- and anti-J.B. Patnaik factions.

Soon after he touched down, Dixit left for Raj Bhavan and the journalists assembled at the airport decided to head to J.B. Patnaik's official residence. I followed them,

and was puzzled by the light, almost absent, security at the chief minister's house. The journalists marched ahead, first past a portico and then through a small anteroom. By the time I got to the anteroom, the other journalists had moved into the next room – presumably where J.B. Patnaik was. So there I was, standing alone in front of the desk and the paan-chewing man behind it. He did not know I was a journalist and said, '*Asila? Asa. Ratri egaratare asiba.*' As I stood there unsure, a journalist came back and pulled me inside, sparing me further embarrassment.

Three decades later, I am yet to decode the real meaning of the words spoken by the man. Was it an innocuous welcome? Or was it an invitation of the kind that the *Illustrated Weekly* report had famously hinted were frequently given out?



Whatever it was, it got me hooked to Odisha from day one. My fascination grew over time, with every twist and turn the state took in the following years, sprinkled liberally with murders, mayhem and mass misery. Events that unfolded in Odisha were mostly tragic, but at times the changing situations also provided for some comic relief. In December 1989, when J.B. Patnaik finally made way for a change of guard in the state, his successor, Hemananda Biswal, was woken up from his sleep by a party emissary in the cold winter night, to be told that he would become the chief minister the next day. Those were pre-cellphone

times and Biswal's only landline at home, given to him as a member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), had been disconnected by the service provider for non-payment of dues. Biswal was stunned by the sudden good tidings. The emissary, the son of a former Congress chief minister, was stumped by Biswal's over-the-top reaction. '*Ha ha ha, mu mukhamantri hebi!*' (Ha ha ha, I will become the chief minister!) a surprised Biswal kept repeating aloud, as he paced up and down the lawns of his house, soaking in the news that night. First elected an MLA in 1974, Biswal, from the western district of Sundargarh, was a veteran politician commanding respect within the party. But the Congress, as always, was faction-ridden and he was not even remotely in the race to become chief minister, until the party high command, prodded by the new state Congress chief, Nandini Satpathy, decided to crown him. By making him the chief minister, Satpathy expected to be the real power behind the throne. Biswal, nonetheless, was overjoyed. He laughed more the next day, when the same service provider installed no less than seven landlines at his home after he had taken oath as the new chief minister.

Not short of either drama or melodrama, Odisha never ceased to surprise and shock. In December 1999, the Congress wanted to sack its chief minister, Giridhar Gamang, for his bumbling ways. A delegation of top leaders arrived to hand him his pink slip, but Gamang refused to go easily. He kept hopping from place to place across the city, with the leaders in hot pursuit. He escaped them and flew off to Delhi, where other senior Congress

workers finally cornered him and extracted a reluctant resignation.

Naveen, in contrast, was his own master – he had no high command peering over his shoulder – and he infused stability in the topsy-turvy world of Odisha politics. But his reign did not rob the state of either the drama or the intrigue that was intrinsic to the way its politics was conducted. On the contrary, high-voltage action was never in short supply as the new chief minister stamped his authority by cutting down to size rivals he thought could sabotage him later. As Naveen continued to scale greater heights, most of his erstwhile comrades were made to bite the dust. Plots were hatched and daggers drawn periodically and Naveen gave repeated proof that he was no pushover.

The key to Naveen's success is that even though he has indulged in political machinations and subterfuge, he has largely come out of them without blemish, skilfully sidestepping scrutiny and deflecting criticism. He is still viewed by many as innocent and incapable of the vileness of an ordinary politician. And when something goes horribly wrong somewhere in the state, there is always someone else who shoulders the blame, sparing Naveen any taint.

That he is single, soft-spoken and always deferential has helped in nurturing Naveen's image. It may be fraying at the edges after years in power, but a sizeable section of the people still believes he has no reason to be corrupt as he has no children to pass his wealth to. Many others refuse to associate anything nasty with the

unfailingly pleasant and gentle politician. All this and more make his journey from a socialite, more at ease in the rarefied cocktail circuit of Delhi, to a regional czar astonishingly adept in the tumultuous world of politics truly remarkable.



1

‘Mere Pitaji Ko . . .  
Bahut Pyara Tha’



The twin-engine helicopter flew low, skirting over swathes of hills, valleys and fields. Having taken off from Bhubaneswar, the chopper was headed towards Thakurmunda, a speck of a town in the state's interiors.

From that height, the ground below looked picturesque. Plantations stretched mile upon mile, punctuated occasionally by rivers that cut across the terrain before vanishing into the horizon in a serpentine maze. Rolling hills gave way to small valleys, which in turn made space for another range of hills. Hamlets peeped out intermittently, the tin and thatched roofs of ordinary huts belonging to dirt-poor families glinting charmingly under the bright sun. Narrow pathways etched magical designs on the landscape, and brimming village ponds encircled by trees and the cattle wandering about gave the impression of uninterrupted bliss.

Nothing from the top betrayed the turmoil that the people of Odisha – which accounted for 4.8 per cent of the country's land mass and 3.47 per cent of its population – had endured in recent months. A killer cyclone had

ploughed through the state in October 1999, leaving 10,000 people dead and destroying everything in its wake.

From the time it was carved out as a province in 1936, Odisha has been among the poorest Indian states. Though the state is culturally rich – home to temples, textiles, breathtaking tourist spots such as the mangroves of Bhitarkanika and the classical dance form Odissi – it barely caught the attention of the rest of the country except fleetingly when the media reported on the chronic hunger and starvation there or on a natural disaster as big as the supercyclone.

As the helicopter flew overhead that day in the year 2000, the situation below was the bleakest it had been in living memory, second it would seem only to the 1866 ‘Na Anka’ famine, which had wiped out a third of its population. Nature’s wrath, combined with administrative bungling of no lesser magnitude, had crippled the state and its people. In the weeks following the cyclone, the state’s politicians bickered shamelessly and held the administration hostage. While the incumbent Congress chief minister bumbled about, his senior party colleagues rushed to New Delhi to petition the party leadership to have him replaced, taking advantage of the chaos to push their personal agendas and chief ministerial ambitions. Relief did not reach the survivors in time and hundreds of thousands went hungry as the state administration struggled to cope with the scale of the disaster. The government abdicated its responsibility and as good as abandoned its subjects. Politicking took centre stage and the people, left to fend for themselves, were looking

heavenwards for divine help when the helicopter made its low-key entry from the distant horizon.

In the helicopter, a fifty-something man, of a tall, lean frame, sat silently in the front seat, beside the pilot. But for the routine pleasantries at the start of the journey, few words were spoken. The man, in a starched white kurta-pyjama, occasionally stretched his legs, perhaps silenced by the daunting challenge ahead of him.

Naveen Patnaik had reasons to be in a contemplative mood. He was a rank outsider who had lived most of his adult life outside Odisha, spoke no Odia and was, for good measure, a stranger to its history, culture, traditions, rituals and everything else. Yet he was on the campaign trail, hoping to become the chief minister of a state hit with the worst tragedy in recent times.

Educated at Doon School and a classmate of Sanjay Gandhi’s, he was more at home speaking in English with a western accent. He loved Dunhill cigarettes and enjoyed his Famous Grouse whisky every evening, a habit that his personal staff says he hasn’t given up. Just until three years ago, Naveen had been a permanent fixture in Delhi’s most exclusive party circuits and rubbed shoulders routinely with the well-heeled and powerful. He had, in his younger days, run a boutique called Psychedelhi from the premises of the Oberoi hotel and his clientele included the fabled Beatles. His circle of friends straddled the globe and his interests included books and films, landing him a small role in Merchant Ivory’s 1988 adventure film *The Deceivers*, which had Pierce Brosnan and Saeed Jaffrey in the cast.

In 1997, one thing led to another in quick succession and Naveen shed his jeans and T-shirt for the politician's preferred attire – kurta-pyjama – to tap into the outpouring of goodwill for his recently deceased father, Biju Patnaik. Barely months after his father died, he contested the by-election from Aksa, the seat his father represented at the time of his death, on a Janata Dal ticket, the party his late father belonged to, and won handsomely. 'I have inherited my father's responsibilities, but no privileges,' Naveen famously told the *India Today* magazine shortly after taking the electoral plunge. 'One of the members of his [Biju Babu's] family had to continue his legacy of social responsibility,' he said.

By December 1997 he had founded a regional outfit called the Biju Janata Dal and was re-elected as an MP in 1998 and 1999 as the country held general elections in quick succession amid political instability. But by the time Atal Bihari Vajpayee was sworn in as the head of the BJP-led NDA government in 1998, Naveen had become a BJP ally and Vajpayee rewarded him by making him the union minister for steel and mines.

When Naveen entered politics in Odisha, he was trying to reach out to the people of his native land whose rusticity he did not share. Yet, as the son of Odisha's legendary politician, he had been anointed by fate and destiny as the desperate state's only possible saviour. Fed up with the games played by discredited politicians, many Odias welcomed Naveen despite his lack of Odia. They knew little about him other than that he was Biju Babu's son. But the anonymity of his past meant a freedom

from being judged. At a time when almost the entire political class was steeped in infamy, Naveen appeared to be refreshingly innocent, a breath of fresh air in a putrid environment. In more ways than one, Naveen was the Arvind Kejriwal of his time, the clean political outsider who had come to perform surgery on a malignant polity. Just as Kejriwal, the Aam Aadmi Party leader, caught the imagination of Delhi in 2015 and swept almost everyone off their feet, Naveen had Odias swooning over him.

Take for instance the rally Naveen attended early in his political career at Panikoili, which is on the national highway running through Bhubaneswar and the coastal town of Balasore further north, a must-stop for long-distance commuters en route to Kolkata for steaming hot meals at its famed dhabas. The Janata Dal hosted an anti-Congress rally in the town and Naveen came to make a speech as the party’s newly elected MP.

In attendance were senior Janata Dal leaders such as Srikanta Jena, once a close aide of Biju Babu’s, who had risen to become the union parliamentary affairs minister in the I.K. Gujral government in New Delhi. Jena nursed ambitions for himself in the post-Biju era and hoped to make his mark at the first major rally aimed at uniting the anti-Congress forces in the state. But the moment he began his speech, slippers and shoes of various shapes and sizes began raining down on the stage.

A career politician, Jena kept his composure and continued with his speech. But the crowd was becoming aggressive and the other leaders on the stage began getting jittery. They kept tugging at Jena’s kurta from behind,

prodding him to wrap up his speech quickly. The mike was then handed over to Naveen. Naveen rose from his chair, walked towards the dais and waved at the crowd. The jeers turned into lusty cheers almost immediately.

Some three years later, on his way to Thakurmunda on board the helicopter, Naveen knew he was more popular than ever. The killer cyclone had scooped up the sea and brought it some twenty-two kilometres inland at its raging peak in 1999. Now after the waters had receded, another wave rose high: this time for Naveen.

As the town showed up in the distance, Naveen reached into his kurta pocket and pulled out a neatly folded paper that his assistant had given him. On it was written, in bold, the word 'Thakurmunda' in English. Naveen kept reading the name over and over again until he had memorized it.

The presence of outsiders – politicians and journalists – in the town that hit national and international headlines in 1999 for the gruesome killing in its vicinity of an Australian missionary and his two sons by the Hindu zealot Dara Singh as the three victims slept in a car, had brought out the residents in droves. A mass of men, women and children waved their arms frantically in unbridled enthusiasm as the 'famous son' whom many saw as their one last hope stepped out from the storm of dust kicked up by the helicopter.

Naveen did not disappoint. He strode to the stage prepared for him and took over the microphone.

*'Mere pitaji ko Thakurmunda bahut pyara tha'* (My father loved Thakurmunda very much) he said softly into the



microphone after the perfunctory namaskar. Naveen spoke in his gruff voice, but its effect was electrifying. The residents of Thakurmunda were ecstatic that Biju Babu had told his son about their town in the back of beyond. Whoops of collective joy erupted and the rally site resonated with chants of ‘Naveen Patnaik zindabad’.

Another rehearsed line followed: ‘*Mere pitaji ne bola tha beta Thakurmunda zaroor jana.*’ (My father had said, ‘Son, you must definitely go to Thakurmunda.’) The crowds were delirious with joy that the place of their birth was so dear to Biju Babu – even if his son addressed them in Hindi.

Naveen did not have to continue much longer beyond that. He already had the locals under his spell. He touched briefly on some of the things he would do – part of his poll promises – before wrapping up his speech with a namaste and another round of deft hand-waving at the crowd. He then boarded the helicopter which was to transport him to the second rally planned for the day, at Kendrapara.

The same routine was repeated. As the outskirts of the town came into view, Naveen again reached into his pocket and another piece of paper emerged, this time with the name ‘Kendrapara’ written in bold. He read it again and again as he readied to take the prominent coastal town by storm.

‘*Mere pitaji ko Kendrapara bahut pyara tha,*’ Naveen said when his turn came to address the rally. The effect of the words was the same as in Thakurmunda. The crowds turned ecstatic.

When the claimant to the chief minister’s chair

presented his second line, '*Mere pitaji ne bola tha beta Kendrapara zaroor jana*,' the crowd went berserk and the police struggled to control the sea of humanity crushing against the barricades.

The job done, Naveen took off for Satyabadi, a town in Puri district with special significance for Odia pride. Gopabandhu Das, the state's best-known freedom fighter, fondly remembered as 'Utkalmani' (jewel of Utkal), had lived and worked here, making the town a popular place of pilgrimage.

Listening to Naveen narrate what his father had told him, Satyabadi replacing Thakurmunda and Kendrapara, the locals felt more pride welling inside them. Their response was much the same as at the earlier two stopovers. Biju Babu's heir had them virtually eating out of his hand.

It was the kind of rapturous response that politicians would die for. But Naveen had it all fall into his lap. He swept the state effortlessly. Other sons of famous parents have had similar head starts, former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi included, but few had such intense love and affection bestowed on them so unquestioningly.

Odisha, in fact, has never been short of famous sons and many of them are still in public life. Former chief minister Harekrushna Mahtab's son Bhartruhari is an MP from Cuttack. A.U. Singh Deo, the son of another ex-chief minister, R.N. Singh Deo, was alternately a minister in the state and an MP for over two decades. A.U. Singh Deo's mantle has been passed on to his articulate son Kalikesh, who is currently the MP from Bolangir. Also in

the crowded arena of famous sons are Bijoyshree Routray, an Odisha minister whose father, Nilamani Routray, was the chief minister during the Janata Party rule at the Centre in the late 1970s, and Tathagatha Satpathy, the MP son of former chief minister Nandini Satpathy.

Like Naveen, the other children had famous surnames and commanded instant recognition. But the similarities ended there. No one was accorded the kind of ecstatic reception that was rolled out for Biju Babu’s heir. For one, the legacies the other scions inherited were limited and lacked statewide mass appeal. A former royal, R.N. Singh Deo had a high stature, but his political influence after his death was confined to the territory that his family once ruled – Bolangir. In her lifetime, Nandini Satpathy was viewed as the Odisha version of Indira Gandhi and revered as the Iron Lady. But once past her political prime, her appeal was restricted largely to her home district of Dhenkanal.

But for the head starts they got in terms of securing party tickets to contest elections the first time, the other sons have had to struggle to stay afloat in the cut-throat world of politics. They have won elections and also lost elections. A.U. Singh Deo has lost several elections as has Tathagatha. Bhartruhari is an MP from the old city of Cuttack, but his influence is virtually non-existent beyond the borders of his parliamentary constituency.

But being Biju Patnaik’s son was different. Like everyone else, Biju Babu, in his long political career, had won and lost elections aplenty. In 1971, a particular bad year for him, he contested five elections – one Lok Sabha

and four assembly seats – and lost all of them. Yet, he was like no other politician.

Imperious, influential and hugely charismatic, Biju Babu claimed a space for himself in Odia folklore. As a young man, he was a pilot, employed with the Indian National Airways. At the start of the Second World War, he joined the Royal Indian Air Force. He routinely undertook dangerous missions, including flying from Baku, Azerbaijan, to airdrop arms to the Russian Red Army besieged by the Germans in Stalingrad. He also dodged bombing and strafing in early 1942 to evacuate British officials and civilians from Burma, occupied by the Japanese.

India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, turned to him in 1947 to rescue Indonesian resistance fighters under attack from Dutch colonizers. With Gyan Patnaik, his wife, who was also a trained pilot, beside him, Biju Babu flew a Dakota and dodged bullets from the ground to fly out several prominent nationalist leaders, including Prime Minister Sutan Sjahrir, to safety. Indonesian President Sukarno conferred the title of 'Bhumiputra' or 'The Son of the Soil' on him and gave him honorary citizenship. In India his bravery got him fawning fans and a larger-than-life stature.

Biju Babu also negotiated the treacherous territory of business, setting up an industrial empire in the mid 1940s. He founded the Orissa Textile Mills in 1946 and the business prospered in no time, employing 5000 people within five years. The mill had 48,000 spindles and 864 looms, producing a variety of garments from

saris to dhotis. Around the same time, he also started his own Kalinga Airlines, which was later merged with Indian Airlines when the national carrier came into being in the early 1950s. In between, he set up a tube mill and a refrigerator factory. But never a conformist nor conventional, he gradually gave up his businesses and focused, instead, on politics.

His bravado was exemplary and his temper legendary. As his novelist daughter Gita Mehta was to write later, Biju Babu was once flying a British officer from a remote desert post in western India when he heard the officer talking disparagingly about his flying skills. Biju Babu landed the plane on a desolate stretch and told the Britisher he could walk back!

Over time, Biju Babu came to represent the aspirations of an average Odia. Courageous and adventurous, he knew everybody who mattered in the country. What he said mattered. People lovingly called him the ‘Kalinga Shandha’ (Odisha Bull). Biju Babu upheld that image with his regular bluster.

Modesty wasn’t his strength and he routinely voiced views that bordered on political incorrectness. For example, when an animated discussion at his office veered round to corruption in public life and his party, he commented, ‘What is honesty? Honesty is nothing but a lack of opportunity.’

During his political career, Biju Babu flirted with various political parties and once even floated his own. He began as a Congressman and had the ear of Prime Minister Nehru. As mentioned earlier, he served as chief

minister of Odisha for two years in the early 1960s. But once Indira Gandhi took over as the undisputed leader of the Congress, Biju Babu's stock plummeted. He was forced to break away from the Congress and float his own outfit, the Utkal Congress, in 1970. For a while he was part of Charan Singh's Bharatiya Lok Dal, which was formed following the merger of the Utkal Congress and six other political parties, to oppose Indira Gandhi. In 1977, post-Emergency, a disparate opposition came together to float the Janata Party and Biju Babu featured prominently in it. Biju Babu served as minister for steel and mines for two years in the Janata government. In the latter half of the 1980s, when the opposition came together against Rajiv Gandhi and the Janata Dal was formed, Biju Babu was once again at the forefront of the formation. He remained with the Janata Dal till his very end.

Biju Babu loved taking risks and ploughed his personal wealth into financing his politics. He spent long years out of power and faced near-total bankruptcy. 'He is one politician whose wealth diminished after decades in politics,' recollected an old associate.

But Brand Biju survived all the tumult and towards the end of his long career came another chance to storm back into power. Biju Babu seized the opportunity in his inimitable style. By the late 1980s, it was quite apparent that the nation was rooting for V.P. Singh. And when Rajiv Gandhi's former finance minister arrived in Bhubaneswar as the head of his Jan Morcha outfit, Biju Babu outsmarted all. (V.P. Singh's Jan Morcha, the Janata

Party, the Lok Dal and the Congress (S) would eventually merge to form the Janata Dal in 1988.)

V.P. Singh’s visit had raised huge expectations and a noisy, excited crowd had collected at the airport to receive him. In the front row of the waiting crowd was the soft-spoken, much-respected veteran Odisha politician Banka Behari Das.

Once the state finance minister, Das had positioned himself as V.P. Singh’s frontman in Odisha. He would regularly address the press and send out press statements outlining the Jan Morcha’s plans in the state. Biju Babu, then in the Janata Party, was the tallest opposition leader in Odisha, but he was not V.P. Singh’s point person in the state. But as V.P. Singh disembarked from the plane and reached the terminal, Biju Babu literally elbowed everyone out. Such was his personality that few could stand up to him. Never shy of hogging the limelight, he hijacked V.P. Singh and made him sit in his jeep. Others, Banka Babu included, watched in disbelief as he drove away with India’s ‘man of the moment’. Biju Babu knew that he had to hitch his wagon to V.P. Singh in order to succeed at the polls. Sure enough, the Janata Dal won the 1990 state polls and Biju Babu was back after over three decades as chief minister.

But before that, Banka Babu was distraught. That night, he issued a statement that he was renouncing public life and set out on foot for a temple. He did return home later, reportedly after a lot of persuasion from his alarmed family, but his political ambitions never recovered from the jolt he received at the airport.

In power or out of power, Biju Babu, with his swashbuckling persona, always had his way. Ironically though, in his second stint as chief minister he seemed to fall back more on symbolism than substance. Perhaps age by then was catching up. He still regaled Odias with his quotable quotes. As the head of the government, he publicly declared that people should beat up corrupt officials. 'Just send me a telegram,' he proclaimed, suggesting that people were free to take the law into their own hands once they had informed him. Hundreds of telegrams poured into the chief minister's secretariat within no time and several officials had their bones broken as emboldened people set about settling personal scores.

But corruption did not diminish, and the ageing chief minister's stock declined. To save fuel costs, he declared he would cycle to work and set out in right earnest on a borrowed cycle one day, only to lose his balance and fall. The government he headed ran aground as well. When the next assembly elections were held, his government was voted out. Then began a sad chapter in the life of the state's most prominent politician. He got elected to the Lok Sabha in 1996 but could never reclaim the exalted status of the past. His Janata Dal managed to win just four Lok Sabha seats from Odisha. So when the United Front was frantically looking for a prime ministerial candidate, the choice fell on Karnataka's Deve Gowda, who had more MPs. Biju Babu was the seniormost in the group, but his claim was overlooked as he did not have the numbers. He didn't even make it as a Central minister



again. Back-room machinations marked a generational shift and his one-time protégé Srikanta Jena was made a minister instead.

Biju Babu sulked and was probably crestfallen. Soon, he took ill and died in April 1997. With him died a piece of Odisha. ‘Odisha is a rich state where poor people live,’ he had once said. On his death, Odias felt poorer still.

Biju Babu died in Delhi. When his body was flown to Odisha, a record five lakh people turned up spontaneously for his last rites, a first for the state. Some wept hysterically while others just stood motionless. Biju Babu’s body was draped with the flags of three countries – India, Russia and Indonesia – in honour of his feats. As his body was consigned to the flames at the crematorium in Swargadwar (gateway to heaven) in Puri, Odisha found itself hopelessly adrift in a sea of collective grief.



The father’s demise led to the arrival of a tonsured and tense Naveen.

‘We felt orphaned,’ recalled Bijoy Mohapatra, once Biju Babu’s trusted lieutenant and the powerful irrigation minister in the government he headed from 1990 to 1995, reminiscing about the days and weeks following the party patriarch’s death. Alongside despair, the legions of loyalists grew increasingly anxious about their own future in a world without Biju Babu. Many felt the Janata Dal would not survive in Odisha. Their future looked bleak and despondency within the state unit of the party grew.

Some then decided that desperate times needed desperate measures.

Even before Biju Patnaik's funeral pyre was lit, some of his grieving partymen had begun to plot on how best to cash in on his memory. Several of his top followers suggested that the urn containing his ashes be taken around the state so that Odias could pay their homage to him. That the real motive was political was not lost on Biju Patnaik's intensely private children. They refused and Prem Patnaik took the urn with him to Delhi.

Having lost his chief ministership in 1995, Biju Patnaik had contested Lok Sabha elections the following year from two seats – Aska in Ganjam district and Cuttack. He won both but retained Aska and gave up the Cuttack seat. On his death, a by-election was to be held in Aska and his partymen looked for a suitable candidate to fill his shoes.

Elections in 1996 had been particularly vicious for Biju Babu's Janata Dal. As mentioned earlier, the party won just four seats in Odisha, including the two won by Biju Babu himself, and party leaders were less than optimistic about their poll prospects in the months leading up to the Aska by-poll. Their first choice for a candidate was V. Sugnana Kumari Deo, a political veteran and a scion of the erstwhile Khallikote royal family. But still smarting from her loss against Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao from Berhampur the previous year, she refused. Feelers were then sent to another senior leader, Ram Krushna Patnaik. He, too, turned down the offer, fearing an inevitable electoral defeat.

As the deadline for the nomination drew close, followers of Biju Patnaik held frantic parleys at Srikanta Jena’s official residence in Delhi on Pandara Road. ‘The more talks were held, the more we realized the urgency for resurrecting the dead Biju,’ admitted a top leader who participated in those discussions. The turnout at Biju Babu’s funeral was a sign of a huge sympathy wave for the late leader. It only remained to be tapped to the party’s electoral advantage.

Having started out as an underling of Biju Patnaik, Jena had made it big in New Delhi. He was a powerful minister in the United Front government and harboured greater political ambitions. The grapevine has it that he undermined Biju Patnaik in his final years, hoping to wrest for himself the reins of the state unit of the party. But not many within the party in Odisha were enamoured of Jena or his crowd-pulling abilities. Instead, they were looking to find someone who could rightfully lay a claim to Biju Babu’s legacy.

Even Jena had a fair inkling of his public standing in Odisha. Piqued by stories that he had plotted to keep the state Janata Dal patriarch out of the Central cabinet in his final days, some angry mourners threw slippers and the choicest abuses at Jena during Biju Babu’s funeral. Faced with an existential crisis, even Jena agreed that a Patnaik scion was best suited to lead the party in the state. The stage was thus set for a Patnaik family succession.

Senior leaders from Odisha camped at Jena’s Pandara Road house and feelers were sent to Biju Patnaik’s children. Weeks passed before the first responses came

from the family and they were not encouraging. Prem said he wasn't interested. Some insiders feel he refused as it would make him politically vulnerable given his business background. Business dealings often fall in grey areas, and though not illegal can be politically awkward. Many viewed Gita as the natural choice as she was temperamentally the closest to Biju Babu. But married to publisher Sonny Mehta, she had settled in the United States decades ago. She too said no.

Now the only option left was Naveen, the quietest and the most reticent of the three children. With each passing day the party leaders lost hope until finally they heard back from the family: Naveen had agreed to join politics and contest the by-election for his father's seat. An industrialist who knew the family well insists that Naveen wasn't pressured by his siblings to join politics. 'It was the other way around,' he claims. One night, Naveen walked up to Prem and made his intentions clear. 'Now that you and Rani [Gita's pet name] have refused, can I go to contest from Aska?' Naveen is supposed to have asked his startled brother.

Even regular visitors to Biju Babu's Delhi home seemed to know little about Naveen. He was rarely seen around the house and he never mingled with his father's political friends. As mentioned earlier, Naveen was busy party-hopping and indulging in the finer things of life. He had by then authored three coffee-table books: *A Second Paradise* (1985), on Indian courtly life from 1590 to 1947; *Desert Kingdom* (1990), on the Rajputs of Bikaner; and *The Garden of Life* (1993), a compendium on medicinal

plants and species. These were published by Doubleday in the US and two of them were edited by his good friend Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. On Jackie’s 1983 visit to India, Naveen had accompanied her to Jaipur, Jodhpur, Lucknow and Hyderabad.

The immediate past of the soft-spoken Naveen appeared incompatible with politics. Naveen instilled little confidence in the Odisha leaders and few expected him to survive the rough-and-tumble of political life. As Naveen boarded a plane and headed to Odisha to file his nomination papers for his first election from Aska, most thought he would at best be a passing phenomenon. But desperate for a member of Biju Babu’s family to take over his legacy, they had no other choice.

With senior party leaders such as Ram Krushna Patnaik and V. Sugnana Kumari Deo by his side, Naveen filed his nomination papers before the returning officer in the district headquarters of Chhatrapur, a half-hour car drive from the seaside resort of Gopalpur. Somewhat overwhelmed by the turn of events, Naveen excused himself several times for quick smokes in the anteroom as officials scrutinized his papers.

The rest was easier than anyone had imagined. Since he neither spoke nor understood any Odia, Naveen rarely gave speeches and, instead, went around the constituency waving to the people. Dilip Ray, the hotelier-cum-party-veteran at whose house Biju Patnaik spent his final days, managed his election. Debasis Nayak, a young party activist, chaperoned Naveen during his first campaign.

Naveen won hands down. But a bigger war erupted

behind the scenes with different factions of the party in Odisha laying claim over him.

Jena was the most influential of the state Janata Dal leaders, by virtue of being a union minister. Biju Patnaik's declining health and fading fortunes had given Jena the opportunity to network and become a minister at the Centre. He wanted Naveen to work for the Janata Dal and shore up the party's sagging fortunes in Odisha. But other state party leaders had their own ideas. Bijoy Mohapatra, for one, reportedly held a grudge against Jena. Jena had become a union minister in 1996 by getting Mohapatra and MLAs loyal to him to lobby for him. Allegedly the deal was that once Jena became a minister, he would help Mohapatra become the Odisha president of the Janata Dal by overthrowing the incumbent Ashok Das. But Jena reneged on his promise. So now Mohapatra took the initiative to float the idea of a new party, robbing Jena of the party itself. Several other leaders were also feeling stifled in the Janata Dal which Jena controlled along with Ashok Das. They all felt the time was ripe to break away and float a regional party under Naveen.

Historically, Odisha had always had an appetite for a regional outfit. Having fought long and hard for a separate state uniting Odia-speaking tracts – Odisha, when it came into being in 1936, was the first Indian province to be created on linguistic lines – Odias suspected their collective interests were often given short shrift at the national level. Even the right to transact official business in their mother tongue was hard earned, as Bengalis, who held sway over the region in the late nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries, did their best to promote their language over Odia.

Up against influential neighbours, Odias had a natural longing for a powerful voice to fight for their aspirations. Biju Patnaik had played on this theme, repeatedly drawing attention to Delhi’s apathy towards Odisha, even when he was a prominent leader of the Congress party that ruled the country. The longing had led to the birth of several regional outfits, right from the first Lok Sabha elections held post-Independence in 1952, when the erstwhile rajas and large landlords of the twenty-six princely states known in Odisha as Gadjats floated their own Ganatantra Parishad party. In the 1960s, regional stalwart and former chief minister Harekrushna Mahtab left the Congress to float his Jana Congress and shared power with the Swatantra Party to form the government in the state for some time. Biju Patnaik himself walked out of the Congress and started the Utkal Congress in 1970.

These regional outfits met with mixed degrees of political success. However fleeting, the Ganatantra Parishad had stints in power, as did the Jana Congress and Utkal Congress, even if it was only as a coalition partner. But Nandini Satpathy’s Jagrat Odisha, which she floated after parting with the Congress and flirting with Babu Jagjivan Ram’s Congress for Democracy for some time, was a non-starter. She remained her outfit’s lone representative in the assembly, never failing to win a seat from her home district of Dhenkanal. Satpathy rejoined the Congress in 1989 and retired from active politics about a decade later.

The Congress had always been a dominant force in Odisha by virtue of being the oldest party. It had a long and illustrious history and some of Odisha's best-known icons such as Gopabandhu Das had been associated with it. But its dominance was never total. Regional parties always played a role and most previous Congress governments either had a thin majority or had to tie up with other parties to rule. Thus leaders such as Bijoy Mohapatra believed there was room for another regional experiment. Aside from being directionless in Odisha post Biju Babu's death, the Janata Dal was also in a shambles at the national level. In Delhi, Deve Gowda had come and gone as the prime minister of the government headed by the party. I.K. Gujral had stepped in as Gowda's successor in the United Front government, but there were enough indications that this arrangement, propped up by the Congress from outside, would not last for long.

Even Biju Babu had sensed the uncertainty during the last months of his life when he was the MP from Aska. He went to Delhi and lived in Dilip Ray's ministerial house, where a steady stream of political friends and acquaintances called on him. The guest list included Atal Bihari Vajpayee and the BJP president L.K. Advani. Over tea and snacks, they would discuss the political situation in Odisha and the BJP veterans forcefully argued that the Janata Dal had no future in the state. Following Advani's countrywide rath yatra to build the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, the BJP was an ascendant political force and both Vajpayee and Advani advocated that Biju Patnaik join hands with them.



Biju Babu’s closest aides were aware of the discussions, but the leader himself was undecided till he breathed his last. A seasoned politician, Biju Babu kept himself abreast of all political developments and the opportunities they offered. But once he passed away, the discussions got a fresh lease of life. The political future of the Janata Dal seemed bleak and a section of the Odisha unit revived the talk of merging with the BJP. The strongest proponents for merging with the saffron party were Dilip Ray, A.U. Singh Deo and Prasanna Acharya. If they had had their way, the Janata Dal Odisha unit would have joined the BJP and Naveen would possibly have ended up as the Odisha president of the BJP.

But the pro-BJP group within the Janata Dal in Odisha couldn’t muster the numbers. The Congress was in power in Odisha and the Janata Dal had only 46 MLAs in a house of 147. The majority of the Janata Dal MLAs were not keen on joining the BJP. And when a drunken legislator revealed to rival leaders that he had signed a resolution that was being surreptitiously circulated to gather support for a merger with the BJP, the group led by Bijoy Mohapatra was galvanized. Soon after Biju Babu’s death, Mohapatra had visited Andhra Pradesh and met the chief minister, N. Chandrababu Naidu, to study the success of his Telugu Desam Party. He felt an increasingly powerful Jena would try to undermine him within the Janata Dal after dishonouring his promise of support for state presidentship.

Mohapatra wasted no time and accelerated the efforts to float a regional party. The Odisha leaders had been in

touch with the influential BJP leader Pramod Mahajan, who saw an opening for his party in Odisha, which so far had shown no interest in the BJP. Mahajan promised to bankroll the new outfit to an extent. Naveen, a newcomer into politics and no more than an MP at that time, was told about the move and he too readily came on board. The other senior party leaders planned to use him more as a mascot – a face to harness the people's goodwill for Biju Babu. An announcement was made some months later that a new regional party was being formed under the leadership of Naveen.

In between, Bijoy Mohapatra and his group spent long hours deciding on an appropriate name for the new party. Someone suggested it could be christened Janata Dal (B) – the 'B' standing for Biju. But the idea was dropped as some leaders felt the 'B' could be misconstrued as an abbreviation for Bijoy. Some others suggested the name could be Biju Dal or even Odisha Janata Dal. A prolonged bout of brainstorming followed and a consensus emerged that the most effective name would be Biju Janata Dal (BJD).

Deciding on a party symbol also proved no less challenging. Kalpataru Das, a long-time Biju aide, suggested a lock and key as the symbol. Some others felt the plough, which once was the symbol of the Utkal Congress that Biju Patnaik had floated decades ago, could serve the purpose. But then the idea of the conch hit the group. Everyone agreed that it could be a very powerful symbol in the land of Lord Jagannath, whose four symbols

included the conch. The other symbols of the presiding deity were the mace, the lotus and the wheel.

Incidentally, the symbol of the Janata Dal, the party they were breaking away from, was the wheel. But with one of the lord’s symbols making way for another, the founding members of the new party were confident that its passage would be smooth in a highly religious state. And as the future unfolded, their confidence was not misplaced.

The BJD was launched in December 1997 with Naveen at its helm. He had won the Aska parliamentary by-poll in May that year and had only been in politics for six-odd months. A massive rally was held in Bhubaneswar to launch the outfit. Among those who attended the show of strength were BJP leaders Saheb Singh Verma and Shatrughan Sinha. Most Janata Dal legislators in Odisha also showed up and Jena found himself left behind, with only a handful of MLAs and an emasculated party. A new party was born with the conch as its election symbol. It was destined to blow away the Congress in a short while.



2

## The First Steps



Having been elected a member of Parliament, Naveen arrived in Aska, wide-eyed.

Though just an hour's drive from the commercial town of Berhampur, known for its unkempt and crowded roads, Aska was primarily rural, where most people were poor and open defecation was rampant. It fell in the district of Ganjam, notorious for what was locally known as the 'Ganjam salute', wherein hundreds of men and women lining the roads to defecate at night would stand up, to preserve their modesty, the moment the headlights of speeding vehicles fell on them and sit down again when they passed, in seemingly unending waves. Aska was close to the tranquil sea resort of Gopalpur, but it epitomized the underdevelopment and poverty that have historically plagued Odisha.

Naveen, too, was aghast and possibly held his nose at times as he negotiated Aska's serpentine roads, lined with filth and human excreta. But he was also impressed with what Aska had to offer in spite of its collective misery. For one, the region was famous for the hordes of blackbucks that roamed freely by the side of the roads

and in the courtyards of houses. Naveen was smitten by their beauty but also horrified to learn that the animals were routinely killed by speeding vehicles and sometimes poached. So one of the first things he did as MP was to paint a picture of the gentle creature himself. He got some thousand prints of the painting framed with the message 'Save the Blackbucks' scrolled across. He gave these prints to schools for distribution among the students as a gift from the newly elected MP.

Though his colleagues in the party saw little political mettle in him and viewed him more as a mascot and a means to harness votes from Biju Babu's sympathizers, Naveen took to his new role in earnest. He soaked in the sights and sounds that revealed themselves during his visits to his constituency. When he first visited Aska to file his nomination papers, his sister Gita had come along to boost his morale. In most of his subsequent visits, Ram Krushna Patnaik and V. Sugnana Kumari Deo, two local political stalwarts, gave him company and showed him around.

Naveen constantly swung between delight and dismay at what he saw. On a trip to a government hospital, he was astounded to see stray dogs sauntering in and out of the wards. 'Dogs in the hospital? Unbelievable,' he repeatedly told local senior officials in the following days as images of the ill-maintained and ill-equipped hospital continued to haunt him.

What he could change was the condition of the dying Tampara Lake in Chhatrapur. The once pristine lake, 5.8 kilometres long and 670 metres wide, was being



choked with the filth and garbage that the drains and nullahs flowing into it brought in. Naveen got the lake cleaned and revived, arranging money from the local area development fund at his disposal as an MP in what was possibly his second intervention as an elected representative.

Naveen was enraptured by the beauty of the Bhairavi temple at Mantridi and the Surya mandir, perched on the top of a hill near Berhampur. The hill was almost barren and he initiated a special plantation drive to turn its slopes green.

Other leaders of the party in Odisha were happy to see Naveen doing things that came naturally to him. A founder member of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), he seemed more interested in 'softer' issues and valued tradition, trees and history. The new MP, they overwhelmingly felt, was a political novice and posed no long-term threat to them.

No alarm bells rang for the state leaders who nursed bigger ambitions for themselves when Naveen became a Central minister after the United Front government fell and a BJP government led by Atal Bihari Vajpayee took over. The BJD had performed creditably in the 1998 general elections as an ally of the BJP. Ministerial berths were due to the party in the Central cabinet and Naveen, as the party chief, was seen as the natural claimant. Many thought he would be given a portfolio of little consequence. Vajpayee, in his first meeting with Naveen in Parliament, reportedly told him that he was a natural fit as the union culture minister.

Naveen, however, got a more important portfolio and became the union minister for steel and mines. His BJD colleagues in Odisha made light of it, believing it was done to honour the memory of Biju Patnaik, who had held the portfolio during the Janata Party rule between 1977 and 1980.

In being dismissive of Naveen, his colleagues showed incredible naivety. They misread him badly, taken in completely by his outward gentle behaviour. He was prim and proper and always respectful of others. When meeting senior leaders, he always stood up and responded with warmth. He pestered them with questions about Odisha, its people and politics in general and seemed all at sea in his new vocation. On the few occasions that he put his foot down, the overconfident party leaders, who believed they were using him and not the other way around, failed to read the signs of what was to come.

One such instance was when the newly formed BJD was being registered with the Election Commission. As the constitution of the party was being drawn up by a group led by senior leader Trilochan Kanungo, Naveen insisted he be made founder president of the party, a position for life. The framing of the constitution was held up for weeks as Naveen refused to take no for an answer. He finally acquiesced and gave up only after being told that such a provision for a permanent president could not be allowed under the Election Commission's rules for a democratic party.

But the party's registration was held up for some more time due to another of Naveen's demands. The

BJD's newly drafted constitution entrusted its political affairs committee (PAC) with the sole power of choosing candidates for elections. But Naveen sent word that he, as party president, should have the final say, insisting that he should have the power of cancelling the nomination of a candidate chosen by the PAC. The demand he made was odd, but not one party leader made much of it. The rules were amended and Naveen, finally, had his way and the registration could proceed.

To get things done the way he wanted, Naveen never raised his voice or threw a tantrum. He spoke gently, gave the impression that he didn't know too much and lulled his party colleagues into comfort. 'He acted more like a child coming to terms with a new toy that he had just acquired,' said a leader, who has observed him closely from his nascent political days. In hindsight, though, it seems Naveen was playing a longer-term game. He was crafty and calculating; he knew what he wanted and how to get it. He took small but measured steps.

With Odia names being Greek and Latin to him, there were moments of embarrassment, too. During a visit to Chandikhol, the town along the national highway halfway between Bhubaneswar and Balasore, he mistakenly referred to it as 'Chadikhol' (meaning 'open your underpants') in the middle of a public address. Another time, he was in Balasore, where he attempted to invoke the name of the state's most famous litterateur, Fakir Mohan Senapati. The long-dead Senapati hailed from Balasore and is still revered for his seminal works such as *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* and *Rebati*. But Naveen got it

wrong, referring to the writer as Fakir Mohan Satpathy. It was equivalent to a Bengali politician getting Tagore's name wrong. But these harmless, and hilarious, gaffes showed Naveen as unsure, simple and still uncooked, perhaps only a ploy to further lull his potential rivals into a false sense of security.



When in early 1998 India was going to the polls, Naveen had been in politics for less than a year. But he had a mind of his own – indeed, he was a bit of a maverick – and he did a vanishing trick during the polls.

Politicians are at their friendly best during election times. They are open, warm and charming to journalists to get the most favourable media coverage. But Naveen was not a normal politician and did not conform to the practices of other dyed-in-the-wool politicians.

Naveen was seeking re-election to Parliament from Aska, which he had won the year before. Deployed to cover Naveen's campaign, my photographer and I landed in Aska, but the BJD candidate was nowhere to be seen. Frantic calls to his personal assistant went unanswered. We had no means of getting in touch with the candidate directly. Naveen was new to the state and I was new to him.

As the hours passed and night set in, Naveen remained elusive. We suspected that he was out campaigning somewhere, but no one seemed to know exactly where. I was beginning to panic – I had a story to file – when his

rather cold and curt personal assistant finally answered the call. 'Come tomorrow at 9 a.m. in front of Mermaid hotel on Gopalpur beach. Naveen Babu will start from there,' he said, and hung up abruptly.

So at nine the next morning, the *India Today* photographer and I parked ourselves in front of the budget hotel on the beach at Gopalpur, a thirty-minute drive from Berhampur. But neither Naveen nor any of his colleagues were in sight. The wait grew longer and longer, and our desperation deeper.

Naveen's assistant was once again unreachable on the phone and the two of us had no option but to keep waiting where we were until a roadside hawker, who had been watching us for three hours, came to our rescue. Leaving his cold drinks stall, he came to enquire what we were doing. When we told him we were newspaperwallahs waiting to catch up with Naveen, he laughed at our ignorance. 'You don't know where Naveen is? Go to Oberoi Gopalpur,' he said.

So off we went to the hotel, now rechristened Mayfair Palm Beach Resort by its new owners, and marched through its gates, portico and lobby. We found our prized catch by the poolside, stretching his legs and puffing a cigarette, seemingly with no worries in the world. We were excited at having finally spotted him. He wasn't, and his face said it. 'How did you find out?' he asked, his eyebrows arched in disapproval.

Quickly regaining his composure, he promised to set out on the day's electioneering immediately and let us follow him. His initial reservations disappeared and he

turned into a perfect host, stopping by the roadside every now and then to check whether we would like to have tea or if we were hungry. As we talked, some camaraderie built up. But he laid two strict conditions – we were barred from reporting that he was staying at the Oberoi and that he was smoking.

Though new to the game, Naveen was already conscious of his image. He knew his biggest draw at that point was his family lineage and his perceived innocence. Unlike the other politicians, he was untainted and unsullied. He wanted to stay clean. He did not want people to know that he was staying at a five-star hotel while seeking to be the leader of a state known for its back-breaking poverty. Nor did he want them to know that he loved to smoke. He wished to be perceived as a ‘good boy’ in all ways, even if it meant being a little deceitful.

His voters responded enthusiastically to what they saw in their virtuous candidate and Naveen again won handsomely. But this Lok Sabha, too, was short-lived and there was another general election the next year, in 1999. Again, he won and continued to be the union minister for steel and mines without any resistance from his ambitious BJD colleagues.

Bijoy Mohapatra, the prime mover behind the formation of the BJD, was least perturbed to see Naveen growing in stature as a politician. A long-time aide of Biju Patnaik, he had been his irrigation minister and number two in the government between 1990 and 1995. He was short and slender, but, colleagues insisted, he had tall ambitions for himself. He was a consummate

politician, known for his astuteness. But he was not a people's man or a mass leader, and his influence was confined mostly to his home district of Kendrapara and the adjoining districts in coastal Odisha. His strength lay in back-room politics. He was an organization man. Most BJD MLAs were hand-picked by him and owed their loyalty to him.

Since he had the support of the majority of the legislators and was the most experienced of politicians in the fledgling BJD, Mohapatra was made the chairman of its powerful political affairs committee. Those close to Mohapatra thought he was destined to be the next Odisha chief minister. The ruling Congress was hugely unpopular and Naveen was inexperienced, besides being away in Delhi as a union minister. The chief minister's crown, they felt, was for Mohapatra to take.

With the assembly elections of 2000 drawing closer, Mohapatra was busy strategizing and selecting candidates for the impending polls. Not that the party needed much strategizing, given the unpopularity of the ruling Congress. It was said that even a bamboo pole nominated by the BJD would win the elections resoundingly against a Congress candidate. As the election date neared, Mohapatra had a spring in his step. He filed his nomination papers early for the election from his home constituency of Patkura in Kendrapara district. Other party nominees had been chosen and had also filed their papers. The stage was set for a BJD sweep of the state when the all-powerful PAC met at the New Marriot hotel in Bhubaneswar for a final stocktaking. It was

the last day for filing of nominations and the deadline was only hours away when Mohapatra and other PAC members trooped into the hotel.

It was a clear, crisp day when the PAC session began. Though a union minister, Naveen was contesting the assembly election from Hinjili, in his Aska parliamentary constituency, but all of Mohapatra's men felt their leader was on course for bigger things. Even if Naveen was to become the chief minister, they knew the coveted chair would come to Mohapatra sooner or later. Mohapatra had chosen most of the candidates and they were all his men. And who hadn't heard of what N. Chandrababu Naidu had done to his father-in-law, N.T. Rama Rao (NTR), in Andhra Pradesh? NTR, the matinee idol, had won a resounding victory for his Telugu Desam Party and become chief minister for the third time, only to be dethroned by his son-in-law, who walked away with most of the legislators, the party and the chief ministership.

The PAC meeting, with all members except Naveen in attendance, continued well after lunch. At around 2 p.m., Mohapatra's mobile rang. At the other end was a frantic supporter from his home constituency in Patkura. The caller's voice was charged with emotion. What he said left Mohapatra dumbfounded. While he was chairing the PAC meeting in Bhubaneswar, Naveen, as president of the party, had cancelled Mohapatra's nomination as the candidate from Patkura and chosen another as the party candidate. With just hours left for the deadline, the new candidate, Atanu Sabyasachi, had filed his papers a little while earlier. Mohapatra was devastated. His mobile



buzzed again and again with more supporters from Patkura calling to give him the news. The PAC meeting ended abruptly. All the party's top leaders were present and they expressed shock at what Naveen had done. They sought to console Mohapatra, but struggled to find the right words. Undoubtedly, Mohapatra would one day have challenged Naveen's supremacy by exercising his clout in the party and Naveen would possibly have been bested. But Naveen had pre-empted him and, with one blow, left them all speechless.

Politics anywhere is treacherous. Friends turn foe routinely and no one really knows who is a well-wisher and who an enemy and for how long. Odisha politics was no different – it had seen its share of skulduggery and back-stabbing. But this was a new low. Naveen's supporters said it was a masterstroke. His opponents said it was Machiavellian.

Though outwardly a soft and gentle person, who constantly talked of propriety, Naveen had masterminded and executed a plot that left Mohapatra high and dry. Patkura, from where Mohapatra would have to file a new nomination to contest, was a two-hour drive from Bhubaneswar and it was already past two, with just about an hour left for the deadline to pass. There was no way he could make it there and file fresh nomination papers as an independent candidate.

The plan to deny Mohapatra a chance to contest the election had apparently been set in motion the previous night. Atanu Sabyasachi was an ordinary journalist for an Odia daily, with a political background. His father was

once a legislator from Patkura long before the constituency became Mohapatra's citadel. Taken into confidence and briefed about the plan, Sabyasachi reached Patkura with two sets of papers, one cancelling Mohapatra's nomination and the other his own nomination papers bearing Naveen's signature. He waited patiently and silently. As the deadline approached, he went in and filed the papers.

Naveen, his colleagues realized, wasn't as soft and gentle as he projected himself to be. Naveen the politician had shown the ability to outsmart the smartest of them. It was only then that they realized why Naveen had insisted, during the registration of the BJD, that the ultimate power of nominating and cancelling party candidates be vested with him and not the PAC. He had long ago worked out its utility in the future. That he was capable of plotting so much in advance struck fear among the most seasoned of politicians. What else did Naveen have up his sleeve, they must have wondered.

It was an operation steeped in stealth. Even after the event not too many people talked about it openly and Naveen escaped public censure. People continued to see him as principled and decent, unlike other politicians. There was some degree of sympathy for Mohapatra in the immediate wake and some probably disapproved of the manner in which he had been denied the chance of being in the electoral fray, but no one did anything about it. Most other PAC members were themselves contesting the elections and rebelling against the party must have been the last thing on their mind. Then, with Naveen

winning a resounding mandate, it was impossible for anyone to stand up to him later.

Mohapatra himself was left with no choice but to throw his weight behind an independent candidate, Trilochan Behera, already in the fray in Patkura. Behera was a non-serious candidate and would likely have forfeited his deposit had Mohapatra been in the contest. But once Mohapatra backed him, his non-existent campaign gained a new lease of life. Though the rest of Odisha was generally indifferent to the dirty trick that had been played on Mohapatra, residents of Patkura were less forgiving. They lined the streets for miles together as Mohapatra campaigned on behalf of Behera.

Sabyasachi lost and Behera won the election from Patkura. But Mohapatra's joy was short-lived. He had hoped the independent, indebted to him for his victory, would voluntarily vacate the seat, allowing him to contest the by-election and regain what he felt was his rightful place in the assembly. But that was not to be, with Naveen outmanoeuvring him once more. Firmly ensconced in the chief minister's chair, Naveen won over the independent. For the rest of the assembly's term, the independent legislator enjoyed the good life, with the state administration bending over backwards to keep him happy, and Mohapatra never got a chance to contest a by-election from Patkura.

Four years later, Odisha went in for early assembly elections, a year ahead of schedule, and the independent MLA went into oblivion. But by then he had served his purpose and Mohapatra had been banished

into political wilderness. Mohapatra contested from Patkura, but sympathy for him had long dried up. The state administration had worked hard to cultivate the constituency and this time Sabyasachi won.

Mohapatra continues to be out in the cold. In October 2000, he formed a regional outfit, the Odisha Gana Parishad, which he later merged with Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) with an eye on the 2009 elections. But then, Naveen dealt him another debilitating blow. If in 2000 Naveen had robbed him of his party ticket, in 2009 Naveen walked away with his party itself.

As the Odisha president of the NCP, Mohapatra was hoping to stitch together an electoral alliance with all anti-Naveen forces in the state. Every other evening, he would hold press conferences and spew venom at the government that Naveen headed. Albeit the loudest anti-Naveen voice in the state, where the bigger opposition parties had largely abdicated their role, Mohapatra was little more than a one-man army. And with days to go for the elections, the NCP's central leadership dropped a bombshell, announcing that they would back Naveen in the polls. The Odisha chief minister had obviously worked his charm and Mohapatra was, once again, left stranded. He remained the state party president, but the party no more toed his line. Sitting alongside several other top state NCP leaders including Odia cine star Prashanta Nanda, Mohapatra let off another anti-Naveen rant. 'Odisha NCP will not abide by the central NCP. We will fight against Naveen,' he announced.

But Naveen again got the better of him. Less than twenty-four hours later several of the NCP leaders who had shared the stage with Mohapatra at the anti-Naveen event held another press conference. No one knows for sure what brought about their sudden change of heart, but this time the NCP leaders, Nanda included, pledged support for Naveen. Some of them were promptly rewarded for their somersault and given BJD tickets. Nanda today is the official spokesperson of the party and a BJD Rajya Sabha MP. Mohapatra is still licking his wounds, having lost successive elections to the assembly. Without a party and outwitted time and again, he joined the BJP, but failed to make a mark. Old-timers in the BJP remained suspicious of him and kept him at bay. Relations with other leaders soured and Mohapatra finally had to leave that party, too. His political marginalization has been near total. He tried every trick in the book to re-enter the assembly, but Naveen thwarted him each time with the skill of a professional assassin. This ruthless killer instinct, which would be deployed several times in the future, too, is probably why Naveen has lasted this long as chief minister.



With Bijoy Mohapatra, the biggest potential rival, taken care of, the rest was easy for Naveen Patnaik.

Being elected chief minister for the first time in 2000 was easy for Naveen since the Congress had been in power in Odisha for the previous five years and its rule, rather

misrule, had made it hugely unpopular. The Congress's fall from grace in the state was both dramatic and drastic. For much of contemporary history, the party had been a dominant political force and had footprints all across the state. Its legacy was to be found everywhere and its exploits were legendary. Gopabandhu Das, Odisha's first Congress president, is deeply revered even today. So is Nabakrushna Choudhury, the state's second Congress chief minister. Local folklore has it that the day he ceased to be the chief minister in 1956, he took a rickshaw home from his official residence.

But the party's immediate past was less illustrious. Since the 1980s, the Congress had come to be dominated by J.B. Patnaik. A renowned scholar whose erudition no one challenged, J.B. Patnaik had been the editor of a local daily, *Prajatantra*. Then he entered electoral politics and got into the good books of Indira Gandhi, who made him a junior union minister. In 1980, he became Odisha's chief minister for the first time and continued to be in power until late 1989. But his tenure was marked by broken promises and a steady stream of controversies. He pledged '1000 industries in 1000 days', but there was little evidence of any new investments on the ground. He constantly made news for all the wrong reasons. He was suspected of trying to hush up the story when Chabirani, the wife of a journalist, was gang-raped and killed. His promises to pull Odisha out of poverty came to nought and the state slipped deeper into hunger and destitution. Midway into his term, a story broke that Panas Punji, a tribal woman in the state's drought-ravaged Kalahandi

district, had sold her young niece Banita for as little as ₹60 to a blind man. The story shook the nation's conscience and Kalahandi came to be seen as India's equivalent of the then famine-stricken Ethiopia.

As the national press pilloried Patnaik, his standing plummeted. Then came the *Illustrated Weekly of India's* exposé of his supposed sexual escapades. The story never stood up to scrutiny, but Patnaik's stock nosedived anyway. He would have lost the elections in 1985, but Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's assassination triggered a nationwide sympathy wave and Patnaik was its beneficiary in Odisha. He got re-elected as chief minister and the state continued its downward slide. Lawlessness ruled and lumpenization became rampant as a group of J.B. Patnaik's family members and their associates seized the reins of power. Odias resented his rule, but they could do little about it. J.B. Patnaik had, by then, totally monopolized the party machinery and had the high command under his thumb. He was forced to step down in 1989 as a worried Congress leadership attempted to retrieve lost ground before the 1990 assembly elections. The Congress lost the elections and Biju Patnaik won, but J.B. Patnaik did not fade away.

Biju Patnaik too did not succeed in changing the fortunes of the state between 1990 and 1995. But mindful of J.B. Patnaik's unpopularity, a chastised Congress played its cards well in the 1995 elections. It refrained from naming a chief ministerial candidate. Instead, it chose union minister Giridhar Gamang, a tribal leader from the southern district of Koraput, as the campaign

committee chairman. Gamang led from the front and it created the impression that he would be the chief minister if the Congress won. It did win, but Gamang didn't get to occupy the prized chair. As the results were being declared and Congress candidates kept winning, J.B. Patnaik sent out both cars and men to ferry the victorious MLAs to a Bhubaneswar safe house. By the time the high command sent its emissary to choose the chief minister, J.B. Patnaik had the majority of the legislators under his control and was in a position to hijack the victory for himself. 'Though never popular, he was the best manager the Congress ever had,' a party old-timer said. J.B. Patnaik had no problems being elected the leader of the Congress legislative party. No one opposed him and J.B. Patnaik's men celebrated. A sizeable section of Odias were left stunned.

Many found it difficult to digest that J.B. Patnaik was back at the helm, although through the back door. Most felt uneasy about the future. Many suffered from a sense of guilt, having voted against Biju Patnaik's Janata Dal. Odias had reservations about Biju Babu's rule between 1990 and 1995, but they still had respect and love for him. A waiter at the ITDC Ashok Hotel in Bhubaneswar seemed to echo popular sentiment when he said remorsefully, 'We wanted to punish him, but not banish him. If only we had known that J.B. Patnaik would be the chief minister, we would have voted otherwise.'

Few had any expectations from the new Congress government to begin with and J.B. Patnaik's latest tenure went along expected lines, with the chief minister focusing on self-preservation. Governance took a back



seat and fresh rounds of scandals and controversies erupted every now and then. Things got particularly ugly when a young, articulate woman, Anjana Mishra, levelled charges of sexual assault against Indrajit Ray, the state's advocate general and a J.B. Patnaik confidant. Mishra was embroiled in a marital dispute with her husband, who was an officer in the Indian Forest Service. It was a private battle and ought to have stayed so. But rather mysteriously, her case file ended up with Ray and he called her over for discussions. Mishra came out of the meeting levelling serious charges against the state's highest legal officer. J.B. Patnaik was in no way involved, but he got drawn into the controversy as he refused to sack Ray for months. Temperatures rose, with political parties joining in and accusing the government of shielding Ray. Though J.B. Patnaik finally relented and ordered Ray to step down, matters got infinitely worse when Mishra later alleged that she was waylaid on her way to Cuttack one night and gang-raped. This time, she accused J.B. Patnaik of orchestrating the assault to silence her.

All hell broke loose and what essentially started out as a private dispute acquired political dimensions. The opposition parties and ordinary people took to the streets, venting their anger by targeting Congress and government offices. As J.B. Patnaik's name was dragged through the mud, he kept insisting on his innocence. Though J.B. Patnaik seemed to have been shielding Ray, it must be said that he stood to gain nothing from the assault on Mishra. But the incident only provided further ammunition to the opposition and to his detractors within

the party. Few paid any heed to him or to what he said in his defence. Whatever was left of the Congress popularity crashed further.

Controversies of a sexual nature dogged J.B. Patnaik. And the rumours got reinforced in the public mind when none other than a former director general of police, Amiya Bhushan Tripathy, took the stand before a judge in the high court as a witness in a public interest litigation over the case involving Mishra, and levelled a more damaging allegation against the chief minister. Asked to depose by the court, Tripathy dropped a bombshell. He claimed in his testimony that the chief minister shared with the former advocate general a 'passion for women'.

In between, there was another sexual controversy involving the wife of a Congress partyman who died suspiciously in a road accident. As always, J.B. Patnaik found himself in the thick of it. Rumour-mongers had a field day and insinuations of complicity at the highest level did the rounds.

J.B. Patnaik's reputation was ruined beyond repair. And then in early 1999 the Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young children were burnt alive while they slept in their car out in the open in Manoharpur near Thakurmunda in the predominantly tribal Mayurbhanj district. The gruesome murders that made international news were the handiwork of a freelance Hindu zealot called Dara Singh, but many held J.B. Patnaik responsible. Despite his strong links with central leaders, the Congress high command could not take it any more. State elections were just a year away and the party tried to put its house

in order. Patnaik finally made way for Gamang as the chief minister.

But the choice turned out to be no less disastrous. Gamang was an affable tribal leader from Koraput and had been winning elections to the Lok Sabha without a break from the 1970s. He was mostly away in Delhi as an MP. As the telecom minister under Rajiv Gandhi, the sheen of the telecom revolution that was witnessed across the country had rubbed off on him, though those in the know said that the credit should go to Rajiv Gandhi's favourite technocrat, Sam Pitroda, another Odia, from Berhampur.

Gamang had the reputation of being a simple, modest man. Even after becoming the chief minister, he would often visit homes of acquaintances to attend family functions and sit on the floor with other guests to have meals. However, he fell short of being an able administrator and a quick decision maker. Though a long-time MP, he had spent most of his time either in Koraput or in Delhi, only passing through Bhubaneswar in transit, and hence he was unfamiliar with the power centres of the capital and the way they worked. The majority of the sitting Congress MLAs were J.B. Patnaik men and the loyalty of the bureaucrats also lay with the outgoing chief minister. Gamang sought to bring in his people, but the establishment was tough to change. He shuffled and reshuffled officials incessantly. But over time, his indecisiveness took its toll and the administration faltered. Dara Singh, still on the run, wreaked more havoc. A Christian priest and a Muslim trader were among those

Dara Singh went on to murder, and large tracts of Odisha seemed to be swept by lawlessness.

Gamang wasn't a hated figure, but he didn't endear himself to the people either. The last remnants of his reputation were swept away when a killer cyclone crept up the Bay of Bengal and hit the state on the night of 31 October 1999. The winds that the cyclone packed in the eye of the storm travelled at 250 kilometres an hour. The supercyclone battered the state, scooping up the sea in some places. In Ersama in Jagatsinghpur district in coastal Odisha, waves more than 20 feet high rushed some 22 kilometres inside, sweeping away all that came in the way. Houses were flattened, trees uprooted and electric polls smashed. Some 10,000 people died in the state and the cost, in terms of loss of property and infrastructure, came to thousands of crores.

As the storm abated, Odisha found itself drowning in misery. Hundreds of thousands were hungry, with aid and relief nowhere in sight. There wasn't even wood available to cremate the soaked and bloated bodies that floated up as the water receded. The winds had toppled electric and telephone poles and most of Odisha, Bhubaneswar included, plunged into darkness. Both landlines and mobile phones went dead. The control tower at Bhubaneswar airport had been knocked out of service and no planes could land. Train services, too, remained disrupted for days. As hunger and despair rose, panic set in. With rumours having a free run in the absence of news from the state's interiors, everyone feared the worst for their families staying in their native villages. Thousands of

policemen deserted their posts and began trekking back to their home towns, even as desperate locals began targeting the few trucks stranded on the highways. Madness took over and residents looted whatever they could lay their hands on, including trucks carrying cement and condoms. An already lax administration simply abdicated and anarchy took over.

The scale of the disaster was such that dealing with it effectively would have stretched even the best-run administration in the country. The administration headed by Gamang simply stood no chance. That a monstrous storm was headed towards the state was predicted well in advance. But Gamang believed in the gods and the night before the killer cyclone hit, he chose to closet himself with three godmen from Puri. What transpired that night at the chief minister's official residence would have gone down as the most comic moment in administrative history if the fate that befell the state had not been so tragic. Officials present recall the godmen acting as soothsayers and being at their sycophantic best. They competed with one another to please the chief minister. Poring over the chief minister's horoscope, one godman said Gamang's star constellations were such that the cyclone would pass 'high' over Odisha, sparing the territory. Another said the storm would break into two, one heading to neighbouring Andhra Pradesh and the other towards West Bengal. No damage would be done to Odisha, he predicted. If any medals were at stake that night though, the third godman would have got the gold. He insisted the storm would rebound on hitting the short-statured chief

minister's chest and return to the sea without causing any destruction.

Gamang is said to have gone to sleep that night adequately comforted. When he woke up the next morning, he found himself under siege. Giant trees had fallen and blocked his gate. His staff had forgotten to stock diesel for the generator and there was no power at home. All phone lines were dead. For once, the chief minister who loved to talk non-stop was struck dumb. The severity of the disaster finally dawned on him, but it was too late. It took weeks to restore the infrastructure and organize relief. Battered and bruised, Odisha found itself afloat on a sea of despair as the waves receded to the sea.

The only ones who found a ray of hope amid the all-pervasive hopelessness were Gamang's rivals within the Congress. Still smarting under the humiliation of being stripped of his position some months ago, J.B. Patnaik once again rallied his men and directed his ire at Gamang and a sizeable section of Congress legislators now demanded that Gamang be replaced. 'Go-man-go,' they made fun of Gamang, as they lobbied with the party high command to sack him. With the ruling party's stock at its lowest and elections just months away, the central leadership relented. They let go of Gamang and chose Hemananda Biswal.

Biswal continued as the chief minister for three months, until the elections, but the Congress never had any real chance of salvaging anything. It had gained the reputation of being corrupt, incompetent and inept. So by the time Naveen Patnaik took off in the twin-engine

helicopter to campaign for his BJD–BJP alliance – the anecdote with which this book began – there was a groundswell of support building for him across the disillusioned state. All that Naveen was required to do was to tell the expectant crowds that he would do everything he could to fulfil his father Biju Patnaik’s unfulfilled dreams and daintily wave at them. No one pressed him to explain what his father’s dreams were or what his plans were to realize them.

Fulfilling Biju Patnaik’s dreams has remained a constant theme for the BJD government over successive terms. In 2016–17, when the Odisha government celebrated Biju Babu’s birth centenary with gusto, BJD workers and Naveen renewed their pledge to realize the late patriarch’s dreams. ‘*Biju babunka swapna ame sakaar kariba*’ (We will convert Biju Babu’s dreams into reality) declared the posters and placards put up by the party through the year-long celebrations. It did not matter that only two years ago, in 2014, a local activist, Pradip Pradhan, had asked for an answer from the government under the Right to Information (RTI) Act on what Biju Babu’s dreams meant. The chief minister’s office gave a matter-of-fact reply: no documents existed on Biju Babu’s dreams. But such small details never really mattered. They definitely did not matter back in 2000 when Odisha saw Naveen as its only saviour and a surge of popular support swept him to power.





3

## The Uninterrupted Reign

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Naveen Niwas, the sprawling home that Biju Patnaik built and named after his youngest son just beyond Bhubaneswar airport, was unusually quiet, while excitement, bordering on mass hysteria, swept the rest of Odisha.

Forest Park, the fashionable neighbourhood next to Naveen Niwas, was no exception. Home to top bureaucrats, retired and serving, and other well-to-do families, the upscale part of the city shared the day's excitement. As the day progressed and the results of the 2000 elections to the Odisha assembly began streaming in, people began to step out of their homes. Roadside tea stalls did brisk business and the tin-box kiosks that sold cigarettes and paan had crowds gathering in front of each of them. Everyone discussed the results and no one had any doubt that Naveen Patnaik, leading the BJD-BJP alliance, was headed for a landslide victory.

But inside Naveen Niwas, the man at the centre of it all was calm. He was also pretty much alone. But for his personal staff of cooks and gardeners, the house, complete with marble floors, exquisitely carved statues and a wide

spiral staircase, was empty. Though a union minister entitled to a retinue of staff, Naveen had, as usual, given them time off during elections. Naveen valued propriety and took every precaution in the book not to be seen doing anything remotely improper. His partymen were also away, contesting elections or keeping an eye on the counting process in their own constituencies. Naveen sat at one end of a long dining table, his favourite spot, and kept track of the results on the television over occasional cups of coffee and endless cigarettes. A smattering of a spirited crowd began to gather outside his gate, but Naveen was cool and composed. Giving him company at the dining table were two journalists. I was one of them.

Electronic voting machines (EVMs) had not yet been introduced and the manual counting of ballots took considerable time. Final results were still a long time away, but early trends relayed by local television channels made it clear that the BJD–BJP alliance was making huge gains. Though the BJP was in power in Delhi with Atal Bihari Vajpayee as the prime minister, the BJD, claiming to be the repository of goodwill for Biju Patnaik, was the senior partner in the coalition. For all the support, in terms of morale and money, that it had provided at the time of the formation of the BJD, the BJP had been allotted only 63 assembly seats from which to contest while the BJD fielded candidates from the remaining 84 seats.

The two parties complemented each other, harnessing the sympathy and support that existed for the late Biju Patnaik, while tapping into the goodwill that Prime Minister Vajpayee enjoyed. Though never a bastion of

the BJP, Odisha had also come under the resurgent Hindutva spell that seemed to have captured the rest of India following the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Odisha was free of any polarization on communal lines. Muslims were concentrated in certain pockets such as Bhadrak and Cuttack, accounting for no more than 2 per cent of the population. The often pensive Vajpayee, the poet-politician, was riding the crest of popularity. His deputy, Lal Krishna Advani, was seen as a man of action in the mould of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

Odisha sends 21 MPs to the Lok Sabha and in the parliamentary elections of 1998 and 1999, Odias had made their choice clear. The BJD and BJP had fought both the elections together, the BJD contesting in 12 seats and the BJP in 9. And on both occasions, the BJP-BJD combine swept the polls. In 1998, the BJD won 9 seats it contested while the BJP was victorious in 6. In 1999, they did even better, with the BJD winning 10 of the 12 seats it contested and the BJP winning all its 9 seats.

The 1998 and 1999 parliamentary polls were seen as a sort of semi-final ahead of the more coveted assembly elections, and the outcome of the 2000 vote was never really in doubt. The possibility of any sudden switch in popular mood was so remote that a despondent Congress had given up even before the first ballot was cast. On a flight back to Bhubaneswar from Delhi just three days ahead of the polls, a senior state Congress minister was frank enough to speak his mind aloud. 'We are losing,' he said. 'We will have to sit at home for the next five years.' His confession was both right and wrong. The Congress

lost badly, winning just 26 seats. But the minister was way off the mark when he predicted its banishment would last only five years. More than eighteen years later, the minister and his party colleagues are still sitting at home.

At Naveen's home on counting day, no one had any inkling that the change taking place would be so long-lasting. Dilip Ray, a union minister and the senior BJD leader at whose house Biju Patnaik had breathed his last, paid a visit and both he and Naveen congratulated each other. Neither showed any emotion. But an hour or so later, Nalinikanta Mohanty, the working president of the BJD, dropped in for a while. By then, more results had come in and Naveen couldn't control himself. As Mohanty congratulated him for the grand showing, Naveen's eyes turned moist – just for a fleeting moment.

Soon, it was back to Naveen and just the two of us, the journalists. Lunch was spartan and consisted of some hot soup, bread and a small piece of fried fish. Meal over, Naveen went back to watching television. The crowd gathering outside was swelling by the hour and many of them now wanted to see him. Bouquets and sweets had begun to flood the home of the leader now set to take over as the state's new chief minister. But Naveen did not step out past his tastefully decorated drawing room into the portico even once. Only after dusk did he change his clothes and finally get into a rented cab to be driven for a kind of a victory lap around the television studios. His first stop was the state information centre, then called Soochana Bhavan and now Jaydev Bhavan, for a live

interview with Doordarshan. Then he visited the studios of private broadcasters for more interviews. On the day he was crowned by the people, Naveen did not have a ministerial car, official staff or a siren-blaring pilot vehicle. As he zipped across the city, sitting in the front next to the driver, I occupied the back seat and had a ringside view of the change that was unfolding in the state.

The Odisha that Naveen was due to take over looked bleak. Utter poverty and chronic underdevelopment plagued the state prone to natural disasters. Corruption was widespread and scandals rife. Many people blamed the vested interests firmly entrenched in Bhubaneswar and the state's all-powerful bureaucracy. Senior officials enjoyed perks, privileges and status unmatched in the rest of the country, to the extent that even a roadside vendor in those times could tell who the home secretary or the works secretary was. A few well-connected families virtually made all the decisions and prospered, cornering government contracts and business deals. With Naveen in the driver's seat finally, people prayed for things to change.

Many saw Naveen as the 'stranger chief minister'. Few in Odisha knew who he was, what he was or what made him tick. The prospective chief minister also knew precious little about Odisha or Odias and their way of life even though he had visited the state often since becoming an MP and a union minister. But they pinned their hopes on Naveen and waited for him to deliver.



Naveen took over as chief minister and came to live in Bhubaneswar permanently. He had shed his jeans and T-shirt for the politicians' kurta-pyjama long ago, but now, as he began to hold a daily durbar at his home, he switched to wearing the famous lungi from Khordha, the town located not far from Bhubaneswar. As Naveen held court in the morning, sitting at the head of his dining table, only a select group of senior party leaders had access to him. In the early days of his chief ministership, one regular early morning guest was Rajkishore Das, a retired Odia teacher, employed by partymen who thought it would serve the leader well if he quickly learnt the local language. But while Naveen was keen to learn more about the places and people of Odisha from those who visited him, Das was mostly ignored and sat idle, sipping coffee and reading newspapers until he finally stopped coming one day.

The new chief minister, personal staff said, had set habits. He would start the day with a glass of orange juice, a few slices of watermelon or papaya and a cup of coffee. Then he would get busy meeting those who came into his dining room, lighting up one cigarette after another. When he left for the state secretariat around 11 a.m., he would have a glass of coconut water. He would return home for a very light lunch, mostly khichdi and a bowl of curd or simply bread and soup, and head back to the office. Returning home past dusk, he would settle down for a drink of Famous Grouse whisky after 9 p.m., though Article V (B2) of the 37-page BJD party constitution stipulated that 'party members should abstain from



alcoholic drinks and drugs'. Dinner was the time when Naveen would indulge himself, with his only proper meal of the day. Red hot Thai chicken curry was said to be one of his favourites.

For a one-time party animal, Naveen lived a rather lonely life in Bhubaneswar. He led the entire state, but had few for company at home. There were not too many people in Bhubaneswar the suave, chain-smoking, English-speaking chief minister could relate to and the only two people who dropped in frequently to share a drink with him at home in the initial years were the veteran politician A.U. Singh Deo and the industrialist-turned-politician Baijayant 'Jay' Panda. Both had illustrious family backgrounds, were widely connected and spoke smooth, accented English like Naveen. Other guests who made it past the portico and into the living quarters at Naveen Niwas were never made to feel they were unwanted. Yet, from very early in his tenure, Naveen let it be known to everyone that he was for no one, despite his show of warmth and courtesy.

The new chief minister seemed delighted when visitors such as the portly Braja Bhai, the all-powerful general manager of the largest and most powerful Odia daily *Samaja*, came calling. Lacking any worthwhile formal education, Braja Bhai spoke no English and seemed a bit crass. His visiting card had a photograph of him. Having come to control *Samaja*, Braja Bhai enjoyed being in the news himself. Every time he left for Delhi, *Samaja's* front page would scream '*Braja Bhai Gale*' (Braja Bhai has left) alongside a photograph of him being given a warm

send-off at the airport or railway station by his fawning staff. '*Braja Bhai Asile*' (Braja Bhai has arrived), the paper would religiously proclaim when he returned.

Braja Bhai loved attention and Naveen showered him with plenty when he visited Naveen Niwas one day. 'Braja Bhai is here,' the chief minister informed his officials and colleagues, letting the world know he had an important guest. Perhaps Naveen was trying to flatter Braja Bhai. In those days, *Samaja's* influence was unmatched and politicians of all parties competed with one another to keep its bosses in good humour. Many VIPs also made it a habit to visit the paper's office, along with the mandatory trip to the Jagannath temple in Puri, on important occasions such as taking oath as a minister. Since it made sense to butter up Braja Bhai, he was plied with tea, coffee and snacks at Naveen Niwas. When Braja Bhai left that day, Naveen went up to the portico to see him off. Some months later, the same Braja Bhai lost control of the paper and found himself in jail on charges of misappropriating company funds. He spent months in jail but Naveen didn't come forward to bail him out. That's Naveen for you.

Politicians of all hues did their best to impress Naveen. They often went to great lengths to project their apparent closeness to him. One particular politician would come visiting often. When he walked through the gate and the portico, watched by the gathered partymen and favour-seekers, he would be ramrod straight. But once inside the drawing room, he would begin to cower and by the time he reached the dining room he would practically be

crawling. On his way out, he would gradually straighten up and walk out, full of himself.

Though partymen were still in the process of figuring out Naveen, they had begun to worship him. Soon, they would come to fear him. An abrupt downturn in the political fortunes of two senior BJD leaders, people who could perhaps some day have emerged as potential rivals to Naveen, helped spread the fear. The killer instinct that was on display when Naveen cut Bijoy Mohapatra to size came to the fore again soon after he became chief minister.

The first casualty was Dilip Ray, the union minister in whose house Biju Patnaik breathed his last and who managed Naveen's first parliamentary election. A businessman-politician, Ray was a senior leader with stature, resources and contacts. He was one of Odisha's richest politicians, with declared assets of more than ₹100 crore. Above all, many of Biju Patnaik's followers were grateful to him for having stood by their leader during his final days, when many other leaders had abandoned him. Given his financial muscle and the emotional connect he enjoyed with partymen, Ray could some day have emerged as a parallel power centre within the BJD. But in May 2000, Naveen asked Prime Minister Vajpayee to induct into his ministry two junior leaders from the BJD. Ray figured that his days were numbered – after all alliance partners are given a fixed number of ministerial offices – and resigned from the union cabinet. His political career nosedived after that. He ultimately left the BJD, helping Naveen to consolidate his position. Naveen barely had to

exert himself but, master of symbolism and subtle hints, he got what he wanted.

The other prominent leader to fall by the wayside as the new chief minister stamped his authority was Nalinikanta Mohanty, BJD's working president and second only to Naveen in the party hierarchy. In July 2001 when Mohanty, Naveen's works, housing and urban development minister, was watching television at his secretariat office in the evening, preparing to go home, local television channels broke the story of a brief communiqué issued by the office of the chief minister, just one floor above in the same building. Quoting from the communiqué, the channels said the chief minister had just written to the governor to sack three of his senior ministers from the cabinet. Mohanty was one of them, the other two being Kamala Das and Prashanta Nanda. In the statement and in television interviews that he subsequently gave that night, Naveen said the three had come under a 'shadow of corruption' and he was forced to act. He refused to explain further and retreated into his official chambers.

As with Bijoy Mohapatra who was denied the party ticket at the last moment, Mohanty, too, was shocked by the suddenness of what had struck him. After a while, he tried climbing up the stairs to the chief minister's secretariat for an explanation. But by then, security on the third floor of the building had been tightened. There were more policemen than usual and not even a fly was being let in. Mohanty left his office shaken. He never returned. A six-time MLA from Rajnagar in coastal

Odisha, the constituency Biju Babu had once represented, Mohanty joined the Congress and won a re-election to the assembly. But that was that. He never occupied any important official position again and died – many say of heartbreak – a few years later.

The deed was done and another potential party rival was done away with. Corruption cases were filed against all three ministers in 2002 after a vigilance enquiry which was completed in less than a year. In 2010, Kamala Das was convicted by a special vigilance court and awarded two years' rigorous imprisonment and fined ₹4000.

The swift and sudden takedown of his virtual number two had the desired effect and no one in the party dared raise their voice against him. The people's faith in Naveen, however, rose. That he had sacked three powerful ministers reinforced his image as someone who tolerated no transgressions.

Naveen went on to burnish his anti-graft, no-nonsense reputation further when he sent home half a dozen powerful officers of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS). In a sudden move, he stripped the bureaucrats, viewed as dishonest and inefficient, of their powers. 'You are no more required,' Naveen told the IAS officers, even withdrawing their official cars. 'You've got no work, so no car is required.' Odisha had never seen anything of this kind and Naveen's stock with the public skyrocketed. The move served twin purposes – the chief minister's popularity grew and the bureaucracy, which could be recalcitrant, fell in line.

As Naveen went about consolidating his position,

so did another gentleman residing in the bustling part-residential, part-commercial neighbourhood of Saheed Nagar at the other end of the city. Pyari Mohan Mohapatra was a retired bureaucrat who had once served as secretary to Biju Patnaik when he was the chief minister. Though imperious and haughty, he had the reputation of being an able administrator. He also had the trust of the senior Patnaiks. The grapevine has it that when Naveen made his way to Odisha as a politician, Gyan Patnaik advised her son to take Mohapatra's counsel since he knew no one else. So Naveen sought out Pyari Mohapatra, asking him for advice on matters of administration and to check out on politicians and bureaucrats. In the beginning, it was all hush-hush and the two rarely met in public. Insiders say they preferred to speak on the phone. Then Pyari Mohapatra took to routinely faxing his views and advice to the chief minister. On matters of transfers and postings of officials in politically crucial positions, from senior police officials to tehsildars in the blocks, select bureaucrats at the chief minister's office would visit Pyari Mohapatra for consultations. Other routine administrative matters were looked after by a few hand-picked bureaucrats, known for their honesty and efficiency. The arrangement benefited an 'inexperienced' Naveen. It allowed him time to find his feet in the 'new' state and his moorings in politics.

Pyari Mohapatra's stature grew with every passing day and soon he came to be seen as the state's 'super chief minister'. The arrangement caused heartburn among many, especially those who saw themselves as close to

Naveen. A typical example was Debasis Nayak. He was in Naveen's charmed circle in his initial years in politics. As someone who ran errands for Biju Patnaik, he had come to know Naveen and did odd jobs for him too, tending to small things such as ushering in guests and getting documents photocopied. He was rewarded for his loyalty. Given an assembly ticket, he won as a BJD candidate and became a minister in Naveen's first cabinet. But his authority declined in proportion to the rise in Pyari Mohapatra's influence. Soon, Nayak turned bitter. 'Pyari Mohapatra is to Naveen what Mayawati was to Kanshi Ram and Kusum Rai was to Kalyan Singh,' he told the *India Today* magazine, referring to the controversial relationships the founder of the Bahujan Samaj Party and the former chief minister of Uttar Pradesh had with their respective party leaders. Nayak was miffed that Pyari Mohapatra had become all too powerful, just as Mayawati and Kusum Rai were during the heyday of their mentors.

An impression gained ground that Naveen was a mere facade and that the real power lay with Pyari Mohapatra. A few well-informed bureaucrats, however, saw through the clever ploy of the new chief minister. The arrangement allowed him to stay in the background, consolidate power and take credit for positive achievements, while Pyari Mohapatra took the blame for anything that went wrong and for the dirty work that politics involved. Many, in fact, blamed Mohapatra for the denial of a ticket to Bijoy Mohapatra and the dismissal of Nalinikanta Mohanty from the union cabinet. 'What, after all, does Naveen know? He is so new,' a retired engineer residing

in Bhubaneswar said, echoing popular sentiment. Pyari Mohapatra, instead, was pilloried for 'settling his own personal scores'. The retired bureaucrat was known to have a huge ego and he enjoyed the sight of politicians and officials queuing up before his house for an audience. He willingly took the blame for the political machinations, though Naveen happened to be their biggest beneficiary.

The arrangement, in hindsight, suited both Naveen and Pyari Mohapatra. Naveen had all his potential rivals cut down to size one by one. Pyari Mohapatra enjoyed exercising power and took pride in the growing perception that he determined the destiny of even the seniormost party leaders. He began to believe he was consolidating his hold over the chief minister, the party and the state administration. Naveen pretended to know little or nothing. He portrayed an image of a non-interfering simpleton. But everything that was needed to be done to strengthen him got done without fail. Only much later did partymen, Pyari Mohapatra included, realize that Naveen had been a master strategist even when he was new to politics.

Naveen's non-interfering style had many advantages. It helped shape his personal image to a great extent. It also brought about a huge change in the way the administration in Odisha was run. One day early in his tenure, the Odisha assembly was in session when MLAs, cutting across party lines, were up in arms. Mahima Mishra, a local industrialist with deep pockets and wide political connections, had been arrested by the state crime branch and the legislators took to the floor of the



House to express their displeasure. 'This is an attack on Odia pride,' complained an enraged BJD MLA. Naveen was in the assembly building, but not in the House. Sitting in his chief ministerial chambers in the assembly, he heard the din inside the House and enquired what the commotion was. When an official briefed him, an unperturbed Naveen asked, 'But who is this Mahima Mishra?' refusing to intervene and indicating that the authorities were free to do their duty.

Confident that their new chief minister, unlike his predecessors, favoured no one, bureaucrats and the police went about their business unencumbered by any constraints. They arrested goons, cracked down on malpractices of contractors and attempted to play by the book. A collector of a politically sensitive district has an interesting story to tell. Towards the end of the Congress rule, a few months before Naveen took over, the district police had arrested and jailed a notorious gangster with a long criminal record and links to the ruling party. The collector's phone rang soon after and it was no less than the chief minister who asked for an explanation. 'Get him out at the soonest,' the collector was told. But when officials of the same district caught hold of a local BJD leader and put him behind bars a year later, no calls or messages came from the chief minister's office.

Odisha was witnessing change after a long time and even the state secretariat, the seat of power, seemed sanitized. Gone were the shady-looking characters who roamed the corridors during previous regimes. Ministers and ruling partymen were also more circumspect,

knowing that the new chief minister would not cover up any of their misdeeds. It wasn't as if corruption had been swept away totally, but outwardly at least it wasn't all-pervasive as it used to be.

Those used to throwing their weight around, including an additional director general of police (ADG), realized their powers had been curtailed. The ADG had a long-running dispute with some neighbours in his ancestral village and one day he visited the village to threaten them. He beat up a few villagers and warned them of dire consequences if they didn't fall in line. The story made it to the local press and subsequently to the new chief minister's office. 'Lock him up if he does not stop,' Naveen instructed the director general of police. The ADG did not visit his village after that.

Then there was the case of the Khariar royal family in western Odisha, with two of their members accused of abusing an eight-year-old domestic worker. As Prasanta Nahak lay in a hospital bed recovering from the brutalities he was subjected to allegedly by two royals, Bhubaneswar Singh Deo and his wife Pushpalata, the child's heart-breaking story made newspaper headlines. 'I was made to sit on a heater. It was hot,' Nahak said, recounting the torture he endured for minor transgressions at the Lal Mahal Palace. The alleged abuse dominated local news for days and Bhubaneswar Singh Deo, the son of a late state minister, was arrested. Like every other royal family, the Khariar royals were well networked and they sought help from their influential friends. Members of other royal families in Odisha, some of them prominent

BJD leaders, sought to intervene and requested the chief minister for help. But Naveen dismissed them all, saying the crime committed did not justify any mercy. 'Let him rot,' Naveen retorted.

Though a man of few words, the chief minister had sent out a message, loud and clear, that he would brook no impropriety. It is debatable how proper some of his own political manoeuvrings were, but it was clear from the outset that Naveen wanted to play straight when it came to matters of governance. He seemed to genuinely care for those who needed help. He drew a salary as chief minister, but in the first few years of his term within minutes of the money being credited to his account the entire amount would be transferred to the bank account of the local SOS Children's Village which housed hundreds of orphans. He still donates a part of his salary to the needy without drawing attention to it.

Naveen also showed a compassionate side. When a fire ripped through a slum in Cuttack, some 25 kilometres from Bhubaneswar, and a Muslim tailor lost his house and belongings, Naveen immediately sent a car to fetch the Muslim family to the chief minister's office. The tailor said he needed around ₹1 lakh to rebuild his house and another ₹50,000 for the sewing machines he had lost. Money was promptly given from the Chief Minister's Relief Fund. It didn't end there. Six months later, an IAS officer was sent to check on the well-being of the family. By then, the tailor had turned into a die-hard Naveen follower. 'Till my last breath, I will be his,' he said, overflowing with gratitude.

A widow in Dasmantpur of Koraput district was equally grateful. The chief minister was visiting the southern district when the lady fell at his feet. A mother of two, she was pregnant with a third child, but her husband, a trucker, had died in a road accident two months earlier. The lady sobbed, seeking help, and Naveen was shaken. He got into the car to be driven to the helipad from where he would fly to another district, but kept repeating aloud, 'She is pregnant, has two children, her husband is dead. What will she do?' Officials in attendance attempted to reassure him that the lady would receive help from the district administration, but Naveen kept repeating, 'Pregnant, two children, dead husband. What will she do?' The seniormost bureaucrat accompanying the chief minister got the message. He called the collector and ordered that help should be provided straight away. An hour later, when Naveen disembarked from the helicopter he again asked the officials what the lady would do, and they told him the collector had already given her a widow pension, allotted her a house under the Indira Awaas Yojana and given her a job at the local anganwadi centre. Only then did the chief minister seem to relax.



Naveen's initial years in office weren't smooth sailing though. His political opponents tried everything within their means to spoil his name and dent his image. Soon after he assumed the office of chief minister for the first time, he got a taste of how low politics could descend.

One Biswanath Majhi of Panasaguda village of Kashipur block in Rayagada district had cooked a meal of rice and ragi for twenty-odd labourers he had hired to work in his field, in August 2001, but unfortunately four of them died after having the meal. His wife and one of his sons had eaten the same meal and also died. The deaths had the classic hallmarks of food poisoning. One of Majhi's sons survived since he had been at school and had not eaten the meal. But the media kicked up a huge storm, portraying these as starvation deaths, claiming that nineteen others had died of hunger in Rayagada in the previous month. The media refused to consider that the family members of Majhi, who had the financial means to hire labourers, could not have starved to death.

Media reports on hunger deaths and human deprivation were nothing new for Odisha. They had first begun in the mid 1980s, during J.B. Patnaik's tenure as chief minister, with the infamous Panas Punji-Banita case. (As mentioned earlier, Panas Punji of Kalahandi had reportedly sold her niece Banita to a blind man for ₹60 because she was unable to feed either herself or her niece.) The story shook the nation's conscience, and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi soon arrived in Kalahandi, along with his wife Sonia, and declared that he would adopt the district and pull it out of its wretched poverty.

Notwithstanding pledges made by the prime minister, Kalahandi and its adjoining regions – the erstwhile undivided districts of Bolangir and Koraput – stubbornly remained poor and news of worsening conditions and growing hunger emerged periodically to embarrass

whichever government was in power. Odisha had come to acquire the reputation of being a state where destitute children were sold for less than the price of a plate of chicken curry and the state's notoriety came to haunt Naveen very early in his tenure. At a press conference one evening in the state secretariat, soon after the Rayagada deaths, Naveen cut a sorry figure. Local journalists grilled him endlessly, hardly allowing him to speak. They aggressively held forth on why they were certain that the latest reports on hunger deaths in Rayagada district were true. New to the job, Naveen heard them attentively. 'Your government has failed,' said one irate journalist. 'You have blood on your hands,' quipped another. The mood in the conference hall was hostile as the local media railed against Naveen, accusing him of letting down the state.

Outside, the chief minister's rivals seemed to be even more aggressive. 'Who needs a government that cannot feed its own people?' asked J.B. Patnaik. The matter rocked Parliament in distant Delhi, where Congress chairperson Sonia Gandhi berated Naveen and his government for 'bad policy and bad management of the public distribution system'. Naveen's BJD was a partner of the ruling NDA and the mounting criticism over hunger deaths had put the Central government led by Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in a spot. That the deaths would become fodder for the power-hungry politicians came as no surprise. While in power, the Congress led by J.B. Patnaik was regularly attacked by the opposition for letting hundreds die of hunger. The moment the Congress found itself in the opposition, it gleefully turned the tables

on the ruling party by using starvation to its advantage. J.B. Patnaik had made a virtual career out of denying starvation deaths while he was the chief minister for fourteen years. As long as he was in power, he steadfastly maintained that no one died of hunger in Odisha. 'It is all politically motivated allegations,' he had invariably insisted. But as fresh allegations of hunger deaths hit the headlines and Naveen felt the heat, the wily politician, now out of power, smelt a chance and went all out to tar the reputation of the new chief minister.

The media dynamics in Odisha were such that journalists of national dailies and television channels readily provided support to the opposition. But for an occasional natural calamity or a rare VIP visit, Bhubaneswar-based journalists rarely had the opportunity to make headlines. Their reports were mostly used as fillers, buried in the day's news coverage of newspapers and television bulletins, and they carried little weight with their editors in Delhi. The only time the editors took note was when they came up with sensational stories of starvation deaths. Such reports were the sole means of establishing their relevance. As was the practice earlier, the media merrily reported more hunger deaths and the distress sale of children, factual or not, after the Rayagada story first broke.

There was no denying that Odisha was poor and that human distress was high in the state. But the hunger deaths that the media were citing didn't always pass scrutiny. Take for instance the case of Triveni Pidikaka of village Gajakupalli in Rayagada district who was

reported to have died of starvation. Her death made it to prime-time television news, but a background check revealed that she earned ₹100 a month by cooking meals for children at a local school. The money she made was certainly a pittance, but it was inconceivable that someone cooking meals could die of hunger herself. The explanation by the district's chief medical officer that she probably died of chronic malaria or an underlying malignancy seemed more credible.

Media reports on starvation deaths had other glaring inconsistencies too. Some who were said to have died of starvation were found alive. Some others were found to have been repaying small loans they had taken from banks – you certainly don't repay loans and let yourself die of hunger.

One of the biggest stories reported around that time was that of the sale of two young children in Bolangir in western Odisha. An intrepid reporter of *Hindustan Times* newspaper claimed to have bought the kids for a few hundred rupees. The family, it was said, was too poor to look after the children and was forced to sell them. Enquiries, though, revealed that the motive for the sale was more greed than distress. The children had lost their parents and their uncle handed them over to the reporter in exchange of cash, though the family had a balance of about ₹17,000 in the local cooperative bank account. They had also received a house under the Indira Awaas Yojana. By all accounts, the uncle was attempting to get rid of the kids whom he saw as an unnecessary burden – and also make a quick buck. Both the newspaper and the reporter



made a huge fuss and claimed they would look after the children's well-being lifelong. But they went silent as the inconsistencies in the story gradually emerged. There has been no news of the two children since.

However, the media campaign against Naveen's 'incompetence' and 'indifference' was unrelenting. Adding to the embarrassment were ill-timed and insensitive remarks of certain bureaucrats. When the media reported that tribals in Odisha's interiors were forced to eat mango kernels in the absence of proper food and they were, consequently, dying in large numbers, an incredulous official asked, 'Who ate the mangoes then?' Another senior bureaucrat suggested that the kernels were a tribal staple. As the nation vented its outrage and a din of collective disapproval followed, details were overlooked or wilfully ignored.

Ironically, the media blitz on starvation provided little succour to the poor. Banita, the Kalahandi girl sold to the blind man in the 1980s for ₹60, epitomized the futility of the media coverage. Some ten years after the nationwide furore her sale had triggered, she was found to be living with the same man. She had by then borne three of his children, but she still lived as a social outcaste in her village. The local custom mandated that the couple host a feast for their marriage to be sanctioned. But Banita and her husband were too poor to pay for one. They were finally married in the year 2000 when Bhakta Charan Das, a former union minister, volunteered to foot the bill for the feast.

To a large extent, the media's unrelenting coverage

of 'starvation deaths' was farcical. An editorial in a prominent Odia daily argued that even those who die after being knocked down by a speeding vehicle while crossing the road in the poverty-stricken districts of the state should be counted as victims of starvation deaths as years of malnutrition had robbed them of the ability to cross the road swiftly and with alacrity.

Naveen stopped holding press conferences after the noisy and raucous one at the state secretariat. The local media's hunger to pillory him put him off. It upset the local media, but they could do nothing about it. Since most outlets were owned by politicians, they lacked credibility and their ability to do real damage was limited. The chief minister's public persona, meanwhile, only endeared him to his people.

Naveen wasn't speaking Odia still, but his softer side was doing the talking, loud and clear. By the time the next assembly elections were held in 2004 – the polls were advanced by a year to be conducted simultaneously with Lok Sabha elections – his charm and charisma had only grown. That he had provided a cleaner government than the previous scandal-tainted Congress governments also helped immensely. Unlike many of the preceding chief ministers of Odisha, Naveen remained largely untarnished, though some of his partymen had courted controversies.

In the run-up to the elections, Naveen launched a charm offensive. His staff had drawn up a list of thousands of people – teachers, lawyers, doctors and others – who they thought were locally influential in the interiors of

the state. The phone numbers of these influential men and women had been meticulously collected. Every evening ahead of the elections, for about two hours daily, the staff would dial the numbers one by one and Naveen would come to the phone. '*Namaskar, mu Naveen Patnaik kahuchhi. Kemitu acchanti? Shankha chinha re vote debe*' (Namaskar, I am Naveen Patnaik speaking. How are you? Please vote for the conch symbol.), the chief minister would say, repeating the same rehearsed lines every time. The response at the other end was also repetitive. Stunned momentarily to hear from the chief minister, those receiving the calls were more often than not overjoyed.

Each call did not last more than a minute, but its effect lasted long. Naveen had brought in a personal touch to the political campaign under way, and the state once again reposed its faith in him. The BJD-BJP combine won handsomely: the BJD won 61 seats and the BJP 32. Together, they were well past the majority. The Congress won only 38 seats, having contested 133 of the total 147 seats. Naveen was the chief minister again.



Election campaigns are an expensive affair and the BJD spent extravagantly to win the 2004 vote. Leaders hopped around in helicopters, huge rallies were held and posters and placards plastered the state. Where did the money come from? Who gave the money? And why did they give money? Like every other political party in the country,

Naveen's BJD is reticent about the funds they collect to run the party and its campaigns, with only a small coterie being privy to the information. Every political party furnishes expense statements to the Election Commission, but it is no secret that they are grossly understated.

There is nothing to suggest that the BJD is an exception. Being in power is the party's ultimate objective. Having wrested power in 2000, it wanted to renew its hold on power in 2004 and spent money lavishly to that end. Political pundits say it outspent the opposition by several times. If the Congress staged one rally at a place, the BJD held three rallies that were much bigger in size, scale and splendour.

Details are sketchy but what emerges is that, like every other party, the BJD too raises money from corporates, contractors and whoever is willing to contribute. The fund from where the party spends and which is constantly replenished with fresh donations is parked with one particularly trustworthy party functionary. Top party leaders call him the 'lifeline'. As and when money is needed, the 'lifeline' steps in. The BJD's first 'lifeline' was a retired bureaucrat who wielded tremendous influence over Naveen before they bitterly fell out. He is now dead. The new 'lifeline' is supposedly someone with strong connections with both corporates and Delhi.

But those in the know say Naveen's fund-raising activity is different from that of other political parties. While accepting donations, Naveen took extra care to retain his image of a clean, corruption-free administrator

who valued probity, decency and decorum in public life. 'At least in the first two terms of his rule, there was no quid pro quo,' says a top aide. Donors were more than welcome to donate to the party fund, but they could not expect any favours in return. 'Naveen insisted there will be no sweet deals. He has zero tolerance towards corruption at the top level that could besmirch his own reputation,' the aide added. But donors still came forward and donated. Some work that the donors wanted done would get done in the normal course and they would be happy. Other donors would be happy earning the goodwill of the chief minister and his party, no mean capital in the world of business.

The aide cited the example of a businessman, the owner of a giant mining firm. He paid an annual tax of ₹500 crore and wanted to donate ₹5 crore to the party fund. The amount was small change for the rich miner. The donation perhaps got him no immediate benefits, but it gave him access to the ruling party. As and when he needed, he could call up ministers who would readily come on the line. Access to the chief minister's office also got easier. Word spread that the miner had access to people in high places and bureaucrats became nicer to him. Given the myriad benefits political donations bring, his investment wasn't a waste at all.

Backed by two rounds of resounding mandates, Naveen got down to the business of ruling Odisha with renewed vigour. The arrangement he had in place in the second term was a continuation of the one in his first stint. Pyari Mohapatra was all-powerful and continued to call the shots from his home at 111 Saheed Nagar, while

many continued to believe that Naveen was still a learner. Only a few at the top level of the bureaucracy knew that the chief minister was calling the shots.

Take for instance the case of Lakshmanananda Saraswati, an octogenarian Hindu priest, who had come to live in Kandhamal in the 1960s. He was one of the two priests sent to the region by Hindu religious leaders of Puri, in a bid to stem what they saw as the ever-growing influence of Christian missionaries and to stop their proselytizing campaign. In a way, Kandhamal was a laboratory for Hindu hardliners who were looking for ways to widen their sphere of influence and Lakshmanananda Saraswati set about the task in right earnest, setting up Sanskrit schools and embarking on an aggressive drive to reconvert tribals who had converted to Christianity.

His area of activity in Kandhamal spread in an arc from Chakapada, bordering the district of Ganjam, to Tumudibandha on the edge of Kalahandi, and his stature grew in proportion to the many temples and schools he set up. He also built about a thousand sankirtan mandals – places where Hindus could come together to pray and sing hymns – and enjoyed complete control over about 40,000 people in the region.

On 23 August 2008 Lakshmanananda Saraswati was assassinated at his ashram – armed men barged into the ashram and opened fire. The motive for the murder remains a mystery. Some believe local Maoists carried out the hit at the behest of Christian leaders, who saw Lakshmanananda Saraswati as a threat. The Maoists

reportedly agreed to carry out the killing to gain support among local Christians, who accounted for nearly 25 per cent of the region's population. Such support was crucial as the area was the gateway to neighbouring Chhattisgarh, where the Maoists escaped to whenever the police came after them. As news of the killing spread, Saraswati's followers went on a rampage, targeting those the priest had tirelessly worked against – the Christians. The month-long violence left at least fifty people dead and hundreds of homes and churches destroyed. While local officials were unanimous that the mayhem was not pre-planned or organized, many were queasy that the BJP, associated with right-wing Hindu politics, was an ally of the chief minister's BJD. Saraswati belonged to the BJP-affiliated Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), but the angry mob did not necessarily belong to any organization. Authorities insisted the VHP, and the BJP, had an organizationally limited role to play in the riots that swept Kandhamal.

Naveen wished to visit Saraswati's ashram and pay tribute to him, much to the surprise of his bureaucrats. 'Did not an old man die?' he sternly asked the startled officers, a rare moment when he lost his cool. The officials advised the chief minister to stay away from Saraswati's Jalespeta ashram. The last thing they wanted was for the chief minister to be photographed laying wreaths to a man many considered a religious zealot. Naveen too understood the political pitfalls. He realized that rivals could attribute motives to his visit and accuse him of siding with communal forces. Yet he threw caution to

the winds and insisted on visiting the ashram. 'An old man has been killed and I will go to pay my respects. Let there be media photographers. It doesn't matter,' he said.

The officials were disappointed, but they deferred to his wishes. As the chief minister travelled to Jalespeta, undeterred by the presence of press photographers and television crews, people saw another facet of Naveen's complex character. As a practising politician, he was wily, shrewd, calculating and clinically cold. He could destroy rivals without batting an eyelid and betraying any emotion. But his humane side was once again on display – he seemed to be genuinely moved by the murder of the old priest.

Homage paid to the slain seer, Naveen was back to hatching his next political move. This time his coalition partner, the BJP, was in his crosshairs. The two parties had needed each other in the initial years and were closely associated since the time the BJD was formed. The BJP, as mentioned earlier, is believed to have bankrolled the nascent BJD to an extent. But after some eight years in power in the state as coalition partners – they ruled on a 4:3 ratio on seat sharing, with the BJD contesting 84 seats and the BJP 63 of the total 147 assembly seats – Naveen seemed to increasingly feel he no longer needed the BJP. Pyari Mohapatra, his principal adviser, shared his belief, having already floated several trial balloons to test the mood even before Lakshmanananda Saraswati's assassination and the Kandhamal riots that followed.

In 2008, the BJD appointed a private agency to gauge the political mood in the state and was startled by the



feedback. The report said that the importance given to the BJP in the BJD–BJP coalition was disproportionate to the saffron party’s actual strength with the electorate and that it was winning assembly seats mostly by piggy-backing on the BJD. The findings emboldened the BJD to fight the municipal elections solo in the central Odisha town of Anugul, pitting candidates against both the Congress and the BJP. The gamble paid off and the BJD improved its tally by almost 40 per cent. Another opportunity to test the party’s strength came in November that year, when local body elections were held in Bhubaneswar. The BJD went to the polls without the BJP and won 39 of the 60 seats. It bettered its record in the local body elections in Cuttack in February 2009, winning 36 of the 54 seats on its own merit. Now all Naveen needed was an opportune moment to sever ties with the BJP and that came with the April 2009 assembly elections. Always looking to consolidate power, he blamed the Kandhamal riots on the alliance partner and announced what he had been planning silently for a long time – a political divorce with the BJP.

Naveen allegedly tried to cut his ally down to size by offering the BJP far fewer assembly and Lok Sabha seats to contest from – only 31 assembly seats though the saffron party had 32 MLAs in the outgoing assembly and 5 parliamentary seats against 7 sitting BJP MPs.

The BJP was obviously aghast at what it saw as Naveen’s ‘betrayal’. The party tried its best to salvage its alliance and sent emissaries such as the journalist and former MP Chandan Mitra to negotiate with Naveen.

The chief minister, as always, was courteous to Mitra when he visited him at his home. But he stood his ground and the BJD–BJP coalition that had yielded tremendous electoral dividends in the past collapsed.

But few shed tears for the BJP. Overwhelmed by the power that they had come to enjoy for the first time in their careers, BJP ministers and legislators competed with one another to be unpopular. Most of them were known to be inefficient and dishonest and when Naveen dumped them no one in the state really missed them. The party fulminated for a while, promising to wreak vengeance on Naveen and teach him a lesson he wouldn't easily forget. But without a party structure and mass base, these were just empty threats.

When the 2009 assembly results were declared, it was Naveen and his BJD alone that had reasons to cheer. The BJP had no place to hide, having won just 6 of the 145 assembly seats it contested. Naveen's party won 103 seats while the Congress won 27. Naveen thus became chief minister for the third time. While the BJP's contribution to the formation of the BJD could never be forgotten, by 2009, Naveen did not need it and the party joined the long list of those he had used and thrown aside, a list that was soon to get longer.



Chief minister since 2000, Naveen was finally coming into his own. He could still not converse in Odia, but had

begun to understand the language that his partymen and his people spoke. He understood the politics as well as the pulls and pressures that were at play in the state. He had grown familiar with the leaders and party workers and also the places they came from. He felt comfortable in his role as the state's top elected representative. But one irritant remained: Pyari Mohapatra. Having helped Naveen find his feet and tighten his hold over the state, the adviser had assumed a larger-than-life profile. He became a staple of hushed conversations among ordinary people, and politicians speculated about his contribution to building Brand Naveen. Much of what was said was not very flattering to the chief minister. Many believed Pyari Mohapatra was Naveen's brains and was the principal architect behind the chief minister's achievements. It was commonly believed that Naveen was a 'political pygmy' riding to success on Pyari Mohapatra's political acumen. But the 'pygmy' thought differently and the problems, in what was originally thought to be a protégé-mentor relationship, soon began bubbling up.

'I realized I was in a problem when Naveen came to see me off one day and opened the door of my car,' Pyari Mohapatra recounted some years later to me. Having mentored him for close to a decade, Pyari Mohapatra believed he had a good measure of how Naveen's mind worked. 'If Naveen is being extra nice, then you are in a spot,' Pyari Mohapatra elaborated, talking about the dinner meeting that he had in Naveen Niwas sometime in 2010. Not content with being just a back-room adviser,

Pyari Mohapatra had taken on a much larger public role. He had become a BJD-nominated Rajya Sabha member for the first time in 2004 and was now sharing the public stage with Naveen. During the 2009 elections, he went out to campaign for the party, taking off in a separate helicopter as Naveen flew in another.

But once the dust of electioneering settled and Naveen was firmly back in the chief minister's chair, Pyari Mohapatra's stock began to gradually decline. At first, it wasn't obvious at all. Naveen, who always came across as decent, was still deferential to Pyari Mohapatra, who had once been his father's aide. In public, he would always stand up when the former bureaucrat made his entry. Or he would tell his staff to check with Pyari Babu before signing off a crucial administrative decision. But in private, a degree of coldness crept in and Pyari Mohapatra suspected it all began when Gita Mehta, Naveen's sister, made an impromptu suggestion one evening in 2010 in the presence of the chief minister. Increasingly worried about her brother's health and his long hours of work, Gita suggested that Pyari Mohapatra should be made deputy chief minister to lessen the chief minister's burden. Naveen kept quiet but Pyari Mohapatra says it must have set the alarm bells ringing. 'He must have thought that if his sister felt that way, many partymen could also be thinking likewise – seeing me as someone very capable of running the state,' Pyari Mohapatra told me.

The dinner over, Naveen came to see him off and opened the car door for Pyari Mohapatra. 'He opened

the car door and then shut the door of the party on me,' Pyari Mohapatra said.

For a while, the relationship between the mentor and protégé continued and both went about their business. But suspicion had started creeping in and shook the trust that bound them together. In 2011, Pyari Mohapatra strategized and campaigned hard and the BJD won the assembly by-election for Umerkote in the far-flung Nabarangpur district. Since he was the principal architect of the BJD poll strategy, Naveen routinely thanked Pyari Mohapatra after every election victory. Strangely though this time, the chief minister did not congratulate him. On the rare occasions they met, the chief minister politely suggested that Mohapatra, already seventy-one years old, should take care of his health and refrain from whirlwind campaigns by criss-crossing the state in a helicopter. But Pyari Mohapatra failed to take the hint and kept the same hectic political pace, refusing to step away from the spotlight.

During the zilla parishad elections of early 2012, a headstrong Pyari Mohapatra waded into a bigger controversy as he hit the campaign trail again. At election rally venues in places like Soran in Khordha district, giant cut-outs of Pyari Mohapatra towered over those of Naveen. Mohapatra insisted he had not instructed party workers to put them up and claimed he did not know who was behind them. But Naveen got them publicly pulled down. The chief minister said little, but had unmistakably begun to cut Pyari Mohapatra down to size. In between, when Mohapatra went to Berhampur in Ganjam on

personal work, his request to be given a room for a few hours to rest at the Circuit House was turned down by district officials. Till then, Pyari Mohapatra's word had been law. But in the changed circumstances, he could not even get a room for himself in the Circuit House.

The obvious slights kept piling up. The phone calls from the chief minister dried up completely and contact between the two stopped. It stayed that way for some months till Pyari Mohapatra could bear it no longer. Feeling insulted and ignored, Pyari Mohapatra got progressively angrier.

The former bureaucrat had played a key role in the 2009 assembly elections and had virtually hand-picked most of the BJD party candidates. Convinced that many of the elected legislators were his men and would stay loyal to him, Pyari Mohapatra called for a meeting of the MLAs at his home on 29 May 2012. 'I was upset and just wanted to show I still had influence,' he explained. But as some three dozen MLAs trooped in for the meeting, the Naveen camp struck. The chief minister was on a trip to the United Kingdom to court foreign investors, his first foreign visit as the chief minister after twelve years in power. Some local television channels, led by one owned by a party MP close to Naveen, built up a breathless narrative, saying a coup plot was under way in Saheed Nagar.

All hell broke loose and other BJD leaders and legislators rushed to Naveen Niwas in a show of solidarity for the chief minister. Pyari Mohapatra kept protesting, saying he neither had the intention nor the means to

topple Naveen. 'With thirty MLAs, you cannot unseat a chief minister,' he insisted. He had booked the banquet hall and several rooms of a city luxury hotel for the legislators, but had not sought any appointment with the Governor, something he would have had to do if he had wanted to stake a claim to the chief minister's chair. 'All the talk of a coup was misplaced and false,' Pyari Mohapatra said. But amid the din of the attempted coup with television channels broadcasting live from the front of his house, Pyari Mohapatra's protestations found no takers. It was Odisha's NTR moment, a throwback to the emotive events of 1984 when a Telugu Desam insider, N. Bhaskara Rao, sought to usurp the chair of then Andhra Pradesh chief minister N.T. Rama Rao. Like Naveen, NTR too had been out of the country, but for medical treatment of serious ailments, when Bhaskara Rao staged his coup and became the chief minister. Taken by surprise, an ailing Rama Rao hastened back to the state in a wheelchair and claimed he had been wronged. Swayed by the images of a wheelchair-bound NTR pleading for justice, people hit the streets in large numbers across the state in his support and Bhaskara Rao's mutiny proved short-lived. Rama Rao reclaimed the chief minister's chair, riding a sympathy wave.

Naveen, too, hurried back to Odisha and his return two days later was as poignant and dramatic. Thousands of party workers thronged Bhubaneswar airport to receive him as Naveen projected the image of being wronged by a man he trusted. He was driven to his home in a huge procession and leaders and legislators alike competed with

one another to prove their loyalty to him. Never a man of the masses, Pyari Mohapatra lost the narrative and control of the party. Naveen did not have to say much to turn the tables on his one-time mentor. As journalists pressed him about the attempted plot to unseat him, he said it was the work of a 'beimaan' (cheat). A terse statement followed, saying Pyari Mohapatra had been suspended from the party. Disciplinary action also followed against several of the legislators considered loyal to the fallen leader.

In all probability, Pyari Mohapatra was sabre-rattling and seeking to flex his muscles by gathering the MLAs loyal to him. He missed his proximity to Naveen and the attendant powers that came with it and was desperate to grab the chief minister's attention by whichever means. But once described as the Chanakya of Odisha politics, he was outsmarted by Naveen. Helped by friendly television channels, the chief minister and his camp reportedly sold the narrative that Pyari Mohapatra was out to stab Naveen in the back and seized the opportunity to do away with him. Once Pyari Mohapatra was projected as a villain, the rest was easy. As with previous instances of rivals being shown the door, Pyari Mohapatra's exit helped Naveen emerge stronger.

Pyari Mohapatra kept insisting till he died some years later that he had never attempted to stage a coup. But Naveen and his men insisted there had indeed been an attempt. Like the rest of Naveen's rivals who were no match for his guile, Pyari Mohapatra too cut a sorry and lonely figure. The queues before his house quickly evaporated and both politicians and bureaucrats who



had cowered before him now took extra precautions not to be seen anywhere near him. For some time, Pyari Mohapatra kept up his bluster, threatening to expose the chief minister. He formed a political outfit, the Odisha Jan Morcha, and contested the polls, but failed to make a dent. None of his candidates came close to winning and the outfit was a non-starter. His political obituary was written long before he died at a Mumbai hospital in March 2017. When his body arrived in Odisha, Naveen was one of the first to pay his respects at Bhubaneswar airport.

With Pyari Mohapatra, his mentor, no more by his side, many began to believe Naveen's days were numbered as well. 'The brain gone, how long can the body survive,' said a Congress leader gleefully, still believing that Naveen was politically naive. Many clung on to the belief that Naveen wasn't capable of surviving the minefield of politics on his own, such was the smoke and mirrors illusion of innocence and naivety that Naveen had managed to maintain. They were proven wrong when in two years, in 2014, Odisha voted in parliamentary and state assembly elections simultaneously amid a Modi hawa. The Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi was the prime ministerial candidate of the BJP-led NDA and an upsurge of support for him began to grow strongly across the country. Odisha was not an exception. Modi promised to change India, end corruption and provide jobs. His fluent, rousing oratory found ready takers in Odisha and elsewhere. His rallies in the state drew huge, exuberant crowds and the turnouts had observers predicting that voters of the state were finally ready to desert Naveen.

Fourteen years in power is a long time and those in the opposition felt Naveen's novelty had worn off. He had won the first election in 2000 riding a sympathy wave for his late father. That wave had long ceased to exist and the subsequent elections were won by Naveen on the strength of his own image and the changes he had brought about in the state administration. A disorganized and virtually non-existent opposition also helped his cause. Now that his image was pitted against the mightier image of Modi, there were many who felt that Naveen may have finally met his match. As the poll bugle was sounded and high-voltage electioneering got under way, political pundits began writing the political obituary of the chief minister.

But amid the raucous electioneering and the unruly rallies, most pundits failed to notice the finer political nuances. The crowds that Modi attracted were mostly members of the more vociferous urban middle classes. Educated youths outnumbered the rest in Modi rallies. Naveen's rallies, in comparison, were staid and much smaller. Not known to be a speaker who could light up the river Mahanadi with his oratory, Naveen mostly stuck to reading out Odia speeches written for him in roman script in his gruff voice. His rallies were lacklustre and there was little to write home about. His audience looked much poorer and less urban than those who invariably turned up for Modi rallies. The crowds that Naveen attracted were silent and stoic compared to their urban counterparts. But in them lay the unmistakable signs of things to come.

The Modi wave swept large tracts of the country and

the BJP-led NDA won state after state, bagging more than 300 Lok Sabha seats. But when it came to Odisha, it came a cropper. When the results of the Lok Sabha and assembly elections were announced in the state, Naveen, it emerged, had not only weathered the Modi storm but had also beaten it back conclusively. Out of the 21 Odisha Lok Sabha seats, his BJD had won 20. The BJP won just one. The results of the assembly elections were no less astounding and left pundits scratching their heads in disbelief. Bucking the trend of anti-incumbency, the ruling BJD bettered its tally. Compared to 103 seats it won in 2009, this time the party won 117 of the total 147 seats. The Congress won 16 and the BJP, despite riding the Modi wave, got just 10.

Never given to showing emotions, Naveen returned to his official chambers on the third floor of the state secretariat in Bhubaneswar the day after the 2014 results were announced, without fanfare. He had a habit of not coming to the office once election dates were announced and until he was re-elected. Once he returned in 2014, partymen and officials lined up to congratulate him, but the chief minister reminded them that there was little time to celebrate. 'We have a larger mandate and therefore a bigger responsibility. Please get back to work,' he told his closest aides.

The 2014 election results solidified Naveen's position as a political giant. Having outwitted and outsmarted all his rivals, Naveen was king of all he surveyed. There was no one in the party who could match up to his stature or charisma. Naveen did not need his partymen. They needed

him for their own political survival. Partymen and officials feared him. Over the years Naveen had built a formidable reputation of being what a Bhubaneswar-based political commentator, Rabi Das, calls a 'smiling assassin'. Post-2014, no one was left within the ruling party who could challenge Naveen in any way. The party was emaciated from within, with almost all the big leaders neutralized. And it was Naveen alone who mattered in Odisha.



Naveen's writ now ran large and it wasn't exactly a good idea to run afoul of it. Prakash Mishra, considered an honest and upright officer of the Indian Police Service (IPS), found that out the hard way after becoming Odisha's director general of police (DGP).

A 1977-batch officer, Mishra's impeccable integrity was well known and Naveen was impressed. He appointed Mishra DGP in 2012 and was happy with his work. Several southern districts of Odisha such as Rayagada, Malkangiri and Koraput were Maoist hotbeds and Mishra did a commendable job in retrieving lost ground for the administration. His men fought long and hard and pushed the insurgents on the back foot. Several top Maoists surrendered while the majority retreated into the adjoining states of Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. Mishra took his job seriously and in the run-up to the 2014 elections, his force even seized several ambulances that were reportedly ferrying unaccounted campaign cash for the ruling BJD. The seizures made news and Mishra

began to feel the heat in the middle of the high-decibel electioneering. 'I was told my actions will be watched,' Mishra recounted.

Elections over, he was keen on a central deputation where he was eyeing the coveted position of director of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) that was to fall vacant after the retirement of the incumbent Ranjit Sinha. He was the seniormost among those in the race and the department of personnel and training also had him on the top of its list. But the Odisha government was dilly-dallying on Mishra's release – an officer working for a state government has to be 'released' by the state before he can go to work at the Centre. So much so that the union home minister Rajnath Singh reportedly had to intervene to get the Odisha government to relieve Mishra so that he could take over as special secretary in the ministry of home affairs in Delhi. The selection for the post of CBI director was to be made in December 2014, and Mishra's name was commonly cited in the media as the most likely choice.

But sometime in October, Mishra got mired in a controversy that blew his chances of heading the CBI. The vigilance department of the Odisha government, under orders of the chief minister, dug up some old files relating to his stint as the chairman and managing director of the Odisha Police Housing Corporation in 2006 and registered a case against him for alleged misappropriation of money. The case was flimsy. Mishra was accused of paying advances to companies for material to be procured – a standard practice in state bodies – and

irregularities to the tune of about ₹70 lakh. The complaint registered failed to identify who Mishra had benefited or whether anyone benefited at all. It also did not take note of the fact that the material for which advance payments were made was indeed procured.

The case against Mishra made national news. Mishra challenged it before the Odisha High Court and the judges handed a stinging rebuke to the Odisha government. But it took months before he could get a clean chit and by that time his claim for the CBI top job had been overlooked. 'The case filed by Naveen Patnaik against me ruined my chances. It was plain and simple vendetta,' Mishra was to accuse later. Having missed the CBI job, he became head of the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). But leading the paramilitary CRPF was not the same as heading the high-profile CBI and Mishra remains a bitter man. But why did he become subject of the wrath of the Odisha government?

Other than the seizure of the ambulances carrying cash, there has been speculation that Mishra, as DGP, had tried to help the BJP, thereby earning the displeasure of the chief minister. It is something that Mishra strongly denies. He, however, says that as a citizen of the country he believed that the BJP under Modi would be doing very well in the elections and he routinely discussed such election-related matters with friends. He suspects that one such conversation was recorded by his professional rivals in the police force and was sent to the chief minister. In Odisha, this sort of medieval court espionage isn't too far-fetched. This allegedly enraged Naveen and he did

everything within his power to destroy Mishra. Aides and associates who vouched for Mishra's integrity attempted to intervene and calm down the infuriated chief minister, but attempts at reconciliation failed.

The high court's order in June 2015 was a stinging indictment of the way in which the Odisha government had conducted itself. 'It is not very uncommon in our country that honest and upright public servants with unimpeachable integrity and having impeccable track record are often hounded by the ruling political establishment for extraneous consideration. In the present case, what is more disturbing is that the Director, Vigilance, to whom the file was marked by the chief minister for conducting an enquiry, has abdicated his duty and responsibility. The action or the rather wilful inaction of the Director, Vigilance, in not ensuring free, fair and proper enquiry into the matter and allowing the report of a sham enquiry to be accepted and giving his consent for seeking approval of the state government for registration of criminal case against the petitioners clearly shows that he was more concerned in exhibiting his loyalty to the ruling political establishment, akin to the old British adage of more loyal than the king.'

The court was not done yet. It concluded: 'The FIR and the materials available in the case diary and even the purported incriminating materials pointed out by the learned counsel for the Vigilance Department . . . do not constitute or disclose commission of any cognisable offence.' The judges quashed the case against Mishra, saying, 'Continuance of criminal proceedings against the

petitioner would be an abuse of the process of Court and result in serious miscarriage of justice.'

Mishra had his reputation restored, but the Odisha government still went after him. It challenged the order of the Odisha High Court and took the matter to the Supreme Court. This time, the government hired several of the country's most expensive lawyers such as Harish Salve and Abhishek Manu Singhvi to argue the case against Mishra. In attempting to fix Mishra, the state government burnt a big hole in its pocket. However, the top court dismissed its plea and the government ended up with egg on its face. The matter would have ended there and possibly been forgotten as a temporary blemish by an administration that prided itself on propriety had Naveen not chosen to pursue it further.

In displaying an almost 'I don't care attitude', Naveen now chose to reward the same discredited director of vigilance who had strongly been criticized by the high court. Naveen made K.B. Singh the director general of Odisha police in 2015, a position that the officer held until August 2017.

Though an unsavoury episode, this exposed a dark side of Naveen, hidden behind his Teflon-coated exterior. The people of Odisha, however, seem to remain enamoured with him.

How Naveen wins elections so consistently is as fascinating a story as that of Naveen himself.



4

Why Naveen Wins



‘After so many years, one must admit that Naveen Patnaik understands Odisha better than all of us.’

This could be the sentiment on the ground and of Naveen’s partymen but coming from Bijoy Mohapatra, nursing his bitterness for eighteen long years, the statement is a shocker. Elected three times as a member of Parliament, four times as the chief minister and now preparing for re-election for a record fifth term, Naveen is a political marvel with few parallels that even sworn political enemies are coming around to acknowledge.

Pawan Chamling of Sikkim is the only contemporary chief minister who has had a longer stint than him. Chamling, founder of the Sikkim Democratic Front, has been in power in the hill state since 1994. Manik Sarkar of the CPM, who was the chief minister of Tripura since 1998, was also in office longer than Naveen till he lost the polls in early 2018.

If Naveen wins the assembly elections in 2019, he will have an opportunity to better the record of the legendary Jyoti Basu, West Bengal’s chief minister who ruled the state for twenty-three years between 1977

and 2000. If the BJD wins the next elections and if Naveen completes his term, he would be at the helm of Odisha for twenty-four years. Time will tell if Naveen gets to do that. For the moment though, he has already improved upon the record of J.B. Patnaik, the state's most successful politician until Naveen appeared on the scene. J.B. Patnaik ruled the state for some fourteen years – from 1980 to 1989 and then from 1995 to 1999. But while J.B. Patnaik's long rule was periodically rocked by controversies, Naveen's uninterrupted innings has been smooth and comparatively uneventful.

In the initial years after Naveen denied Mohapatra the election ticket at the last moment, he was filled with rage and was plotting revenge. Every now and then, the media-friendly Mohapatra would announce that the chief minister's days were numbered and that the people of Odisha had seen through the man. But in the eighteen years that have gone by since, none of Mohapatra's predictions have come true. The desire for revenge is now beginning to give way to resignation and Mohapatra is willing to accept that Naveen has outwitted seasoned politicians like him.

Narsingha Mishra, once Biju Patnaik's law minister and currently the leader of the opposition in the Odisha assembly, is also not hesitant to acknowledge Naveen's prowess. 'Yes, he has been very successful in winning election after election. That's a feat that any politician will be proud of and opponents jealous of,' Mishra, of the Congress party, pointed out.

So how does Naveen go about winning elections

so regularly and with such seeming ease? What is the magic? What is the secret of his success? Why have Odias embraced so firmly a man who still does not speak their language? And how has he managed to not succumb to anti-incumbency, which ought to have knocked out the shine of the man many years ago? Why is the faith of Odias in Naveen so total and so overwhelming despite his continued aloofness? The chief minister barely communicates with the people, but how is it that their bond has been so strong and this long-lasting?



‘Naveen wins big because he is primarily a minimalist,’ said a top bureaucrat who had in the past been a close associate of the chief minister. Ever since he first campaigned to be elected as the MP from Aska, hiding his lit cigarette from the people, Naveen has been mindful of his image. Unlike the other average politicians of Odisha, synonymous with pompousness and hubris, Naveen is low-key and shy. He came without any baggage and has till now not collected any. He uprooted himself from his cocktail circuit and came to live in Bhubaneswar, without family or friends. In the initial years, he had two acquaintances to share a drink with at Naveen Niwas – A.U. Singh Deo and Jay Panda. But despite being the most powerful person in the state, his social circle has only shrunk. Today Naveen determines the destiny of 4.5 crore Odias, but he drinks whisky alone at home, having fallen out with both Singh Deo and Panda. He failed to make any new friends in

the intervening years. He generally keeps to himself and his spartan lifestyle – kurta-pyjama and chappals without any ostentatious outward sign – has left no room for accusations to be levelled at him.

That he has no family or friends hanging about has immensely helped Naveen bolster his image as incorruptible. From time to time, his ministerial colleagues and party legislators get embroiled in controversies. They regularly face accusations of making money or helping cronies make money. But Naveen is generally spared such accusations. ‘Why would he be corrupt? He is all alone and has no reason to be corrupt,’ pointed out Anjali Behera, a housewife in the coastal town of Kendrapara. Such sentiments are commonly held, both in the state’s urban centres and in its rural heartland. ‘Naveen Babu is not corrupt though his men may be corrupt,’ insisted Trilochan Bhoi, a part-time teacher in the tribal district of Keonjhar. That Naveen is personally honest is a widely held belief that has survived the test of time. Even political rivals concede that accusations of corruption at a personal level will not stick or tarnish the chief minister. Rabi Das, a political commentator, is not a fan of Naveen, but acknowledged that the chief minister’s own integrity has never been in doubt. ‘Why would he need to be dishonest? He has no reasons to be,’ explained Das. Prasad Harichandan was the Odisha Congress president from 2014 to early 2018. Even he confessed that targeting Naveen over graft was a difficult task. ‘He is still seen to be honest. You may call it our

failure,' Harichandan admitted.

Aides say the chief minister's minimal personal needs have resonated with the voters and sustained his honest image. 'Apart from cigarettes, his daily quota of drinks and maybe the power that comes along with the position of chief minister, there is nothing else that possibly attracts him,' said one of them. He dresses simply, eats sparingly, smokes heavily and drinks leisurely.

Naveen always had a simple way of looking at life, his journalist friend Vir Sanghvi wrote, recounting the chief minister's earlier years in a weekly pullout of the *Hindustan Times* a decade ago. 'Pappu [Naveen's pet name] didn't seem at all concerned about worldly goods. He lived at the right address, had two servants and a car and a driver [he can't drive], but that was about it. He never ate at fancy restaurants, and guests to his house, no matter how grand, ate whatever Manoj, the cook, made. His entire wardrobe seemed to consist of elegant but basic kurta-pyjamas.' Sanghvi went on to write that Naveen, when asked one day in a 'slightly drunken moment' about his simplicity, said, 'I have seen the most beautiful things in people's houses. To love beauty, you don't need to own it. You must just appreciate it.'

That being the guiding principle of Naveen's life, it is not hard to guess why Odias have overwhelmingly fallen for him and come to be generally convinced that he is Mr Clean. The chief minister's somewhat clinical and detached behaviour has helped in no small measure. When he came to live in Bhubaneswar, he did not bring

his friends from Delhi. Some of them do stay in touch and visit Odisha occasionally, but Naveen has generally kept them at arm's length. He still catches up and socializes with them a few times a year, but that is only when he visits Delhi and some of the old friends gather discreetly at some hotel. Naveen's friends from all over the world apparently miss him, but he doesn't seem to miss them. Hundreds of greetings cards sent by friends still pour in every year on his birthday and the New Year. Some write long, intimate personal messages. Last year he got a message from a member of the royal family of Monaco. The chief minister reads the messages, but never replies. But why not? His take is simple: 'I am fine, they are fine. Why bother?'

His extended family has also spared him the blushes. Naveen is closest to his sister Gita, but she lives with her family in the US. She visits often to check on her brother, but prefers to stay within Naveen Niwas beyond public gaze. Prem is in Delhi and rarely visits. The last time he was seen in Bhubaneswar was perhaps for the last rites of Gyan Patnaik a couple of years ago. Naveen does not seem to be particularly close to Prem's family either. Arun Patnaik, Prem's young, lanky son, was spotted in Cuttack a couple of years ago and this instantly triggered speculation that he could be at the core of the family's political succession plan. The boy went back and has not been seen in Odisha since. The rumours, consequently, ran out of steam.

Being alone helped Naveen immensely in a state where politicians in power were known to run a family empire.



When J.B. Patnaik ruled, the fortunes of his family grew. Members of his extended family were always around, to the extent that if someone had to throw a stone in Odisha, the saying was, the stone would certainly hit a Patnaik. But Naveen turned out to be different.

That Naveen displays no soft corner or attachment for anyone is his biggest political asset. A top bureaucrat, who served in the chief minister's secretariat and on whom Naveen depended heavily, has an interesting story to tell. The official's stint at the chief minister's office had come to an end and he was moving to another important assignment. The bureaucrat went to say goodbye to Naveen, but in going in and coming out of the chief minister's room, he took barely thirty seconds. Though known for courtesy and etiquette, Naveen refused to engage in any conversation. The officer was already a thing of the past in Naveen's mind and so he felt no attachment to him any more. This trait of his explains his ability to sacrifice party colleagues and close associates so often. Given that he always shows people the door on the pretext of achieving something noble, he never attracts public disapproval. On the contrary, he is applauded for being decisive. And with every such 'decisive' action, Naveen's own image as a no-nonsense chief minister has grown.

By rough estimates, Naveen has so far shown the door to some forty-six of his ministers on some pretext or the other. It all began with the sudden axing of Nalinikanta Mohanty, who was also the working president of the party, along with two other ministers, Prashanta Nanda and Kamala Das. A year later, four more ministers – Debi

Prasad Mishra, Amar Prasad Satpathy, Duryodhan Majhi and Adwait Prasad Singh – were sacked. Two of these were dropped on grounds of non-performance while the other two had to go over alleged links to scams and corruption. They were followed by Pramila Mallik, the minister for women and child development, who had to step down a year later for not disclosing in her poll affidavit a case that was pending against her. In a nutshell, whenever there was the slightest whiff of a controversy, Naveen swiftly put the blame on someone else and removed them.

Rabi Narayan Nanda was the high-profile minister for water resources and was caught in a sting in March 2006 that purportedly showed him attempting to buy the loyalty of an opposition MLA. All hell broke loose and Naveen acted with alacrity, sacking Nanda quickly. A hooch tragedy took place in Ganjam in April 2006 and excise minister Kalindi Behera had to go. Allegations of bribes engulfed a World Bank–assisted health project in May the same year and health minister Bijayshree Routray had to put in his papers. Bishnu Charan Das, the school and mass education minister, faced accusations of having fudged his school-leaving examination mark sheet in August 2007. It embarrassed the government and Naveen forced Das to resign to save face. In all these cases, the underlying theme is the same – however high or mighty the persons may be, Naveen would not tolerate their wrongdoings. Irrespective of their guilt or innocence, the ministers had to go and Naveen held on to people's trust.

Having first become the chief minister by virtue of being his father's son, Naveen never felt that he owed his position to any of his party colleagues. He, therefore, does not feel indebted to any of them.

That caste equations or regional considerations – between coastal, central, western, northern and southern Odisha – never really played a determining role in electoral politics helped Naveen hugely. Naveen belongs to the Karana (Kayasth) caste, which accounted for less than 4 per cent of the state's population, but that was never a liability for him. Other backward classes (OBCs) and Chasas, or farmers, are the numerically dominant castes in Odisha. But while the state may be a bit conservative in matters of social life, with inter-caste marriages still frowned upon, castes have never been mobilized in a big way for electoral purposes and Odisha has had four chief ministers so far, out of a total of fourteen, from the numerically insignificant Karana caste. Interestingly, Odisha has also had a Bengali chief minister. Biren Mitra, who was the chief minister from 1963 to 1965, was a Bengali by birth though he and his parents had settled in Cuttack. Tensions do exist between coastal Odisha and western Odisha, with the latter accusing the former of cornering political power and government largesse, but the differences have never led to the regions voting differently. Instead, voters share a pan-Odisha identity, freeing up Naveen from any caste and regional burdens.

Whenever someone gets drawn into a scandal, Naveen's reflex action is to show him the door, irrespective of which caste or region he belongs to. So ministers

continue to pay the price, one of the latest being senior minister Damodar Raut for his derogatory remarks against brahmins. At a public function, Raut said, 'While no tribal is seen begging in any part of the state, one can spot brahmins resorting to begging in places such as bus stands.' His comment triggered an uproar and within days Naveen sacked him from the council of ministers in December 2017.

Naveen has never allowed any dirt to stick to him no matter who is involved. Take for instance the case of a domestic discord between a young couple in Balasore that became a matter of public consternation in Odisha sometime in 2013. A young housewife alleged that her husband, the son of law minister and senior BJD leader Raghunath Mohanty, had been harassing her for dowry. Those in the dock were powerful people and public sympathy lay squarely with the housewife, the proverbial underdog. Unlike most other states where the administration would have sought to bail out the minister, Naveen's establishment did exactly the opposite. Raghunath Mohanty and his wife had gone underground and the police tracked them down. Cases were registered and the minister and his family members were arrested. Mohanty's standing in the public eye plunged, but Naveen's stock for standing up against any supposed wrongdoing rose exponentially. Some time later, the minister's son and his estranged wife patched up. But the minister is yet to win back Naveen's favour.

How much of Naveen's no-nonsense swiftness was because of personal conviction and how much due to

political expediency remains a matter of speculation. On many occasions, having driven home the point that he would not tolerate any misconduct, the chief minister has gone back to embracing the same set of people he had sacked for supposedly being tainted. 'He genuinely appreciates good things. But then he also has to dirty his hands from time to time to survive in politics,' said a bureaucrat who has seen Naveen operating from close quarters. 'Being a saint is not always good enough. One also has to be a Chanakya to succeed,' he added. Prashanta Nanda, the minister sacked alongside Nalinikanta Mohanty for being under the 'shadow of corruption' in 2001, and Maheswar Mohanty, the Odisha assembly speaker Naveen jettisoned in 2008 after he got embroiled in an alleged sex controversy involving a lady staffer, are among several politicians who managed to get back into Naveen's good books. They were given tickets to contest subsequent elections and were accommodated in various capacities once the controversies they were ensnared in died down. Nanda became the official spokesman of the BJD and was later made a Rajya Sabha MP. Maheswar Mohanty is currently an influential minister in Naveen's cabinet.

Several of the legislators axed for having sided with Pyari Mohan Mohapatra during the so-called coup in 2012 are back in favour, Prafulla Samal and Pratap Jena being two of them. Samal is back as the minister for women and child development and Jena holds the portfolio of law, health and family welfare.

Yet the periodic surgeries that Naveen conducts, casting

aside the local satraps, serve a purpose. He determines the narrative and stays above the scandals. It helped him sidestep public censure when a deadly fire ripped through a city hospital in Bhubaneswar and charred to death some twenty-four patients. Atanu Sabyasachi, the health minister, had to accept responsibility and step down to assuage public anger. Naveen, once again, escaped criticism, though, as the home minister, he too should have shared part of the blame. Administering the fire services department fell within the purview of the home minister and it later emerged that the fire safety audit of the Som Hospital had not been done for years.



Nurtured with care and aggressively shielded from wear and tear, Naveen's reputation helped him escape scrutiny when Odisha witnessed two of its largest scams in recent history – one related to mining and the other involving private firms running Ponzi schemes, popularly called chit funds. Despite his emphasis on providing a clean administration, the two extraordinarily organized plunders pushed the poor state and its people deeper into penury under Naveen's watch.

The mining scam involved an unbridled loot of the state's mineral resources which could, in size and scale, only be compared to the manner in which the more notorious Reddy brothers of Karnataka allegedly spirited away precious minerals worth thousands of crores from the mines in Bellary. The scandal happened when China

was preparing to host the 2008 Beijing Olympics and its appetite for iron ore to boost steel production for building infrastructure was at its peak. Iron ore prices surged, from ₹1200 a tonne to ₹8000, and private players, virtually the who's who in the Indian corporate sector, sensed an easy killing. They plunged into mining iron ore and manganese from the tribal districts of Keonjhar and Sundargarh. In doing so, they either mined in excess of the limits set for them by various regulatory agencies or simply disregarded all norms and mined in areas without permission. The production of iron ore in Odisha rocketed – from 81 lakh tonnes in 1994–95 to 700 lakh tonnes in 2008–09. Exports stood at 163 lakh tonnes.

The Justice M.B. Shah Commission of Inquiry, which investigated the scam between 2010 and 2013, found that of the 192 mining leases of iron and/or manganese ores operating in Odisha during the mining boom, 147 lessees did not have proper agreements executed as per the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) – MMDR – Act 1957 which allows them to mine the land. As many as 94 did not have environmental clearances. Similarly, of the 176 leases located in forest areas, 47 mines operated without the necessary forest clearance from the ministry of environment and forests. The MMDR Act says that the monetary value of the illegal extraction is required to be recovered under Section 21(5) of the act. The Shah Commission pegged the scam to be worth ₹59,000 crore, while in August 2017 the Supreme Court asked the errant mining companies to pay ₹17,576 crore for excess extraction of iron ore and manganese.

Odisha led the iron ore boom in India, but got very little from it. This is because, in many cases, the ore was mined and sold, but not declared to the state government. Royalty on ore, which the state government got from mining, was very low. Between 2004 and 2012, a total of 5241.4 lakh tonnes of ore worth ₹199,847.5 crore was mined, but the royalty rates were between ₹8 and ₹27 per metric tonne, even though the price of ore rose to ₹8000. The Shah Commission was caustic in its findings, saying that the mine owners did not pay minimum wages to the labourers even though their own income was in crores. 'If the value of the iron ore and manganese mined in Sundargarh and Keonjhar districts for one year had been given to the tribal families of the two Odisha districts, each of the tribals would be richer by Rs 9.43 lakh. If the same amount was distributed among all the families of the two districts, they would be richer by Rs 4.5 lakh each,' the judge concluded.

The mining scam was the result of lax enforcement of rules and suspected nexus between mining firms and officials. A similar nexus was on display when the Ponzi schemes flourished in the state, defrauding tens of thousands of small depositors of their lifetime savings and threatening to besmirch the lily-white image of the chief minister.

Ponzi firms, which get their name from the Italian swindler Charles Ponzi, who defrauded thousands in the early twentieth century, collect money from investors by promising exorbitantly high returns. Old investors are repaid by money raised from new investors. This continues



till the chain is broken when fresh investments dry up. While the initial investors have, by then, mostly got back their money, subsequent investors are left high and dry.

Dozens of Ponzi firms had a free run in Odisha, allegedly aided and abetted by influential politicians and their aides. Once the scam came to light and the CBI stepped in, several people were arrested and many others interrogated. One of those questioned was Saroj Sahu, an employee of Naveen Niwas who regularly issued BJD press releases under Naveen's name ahead of the 2014 elections. Several other leading politicians of the state were in the net. Among those jailed was Ramchandra Hansda, the BJD MP from Mayurbhanj and director of Nabadiganta Capital Services Limited, which fraudulently collected around ₹15 crore from investors and never bothered to return the money. BJD MLA Subarna Nayak and BJP MP Hitesh Bagarti were also arrested over links to the same company.

Others arrested included BJD MLAs Pravata Kumar Tripathy and Pravat Ranjan Biswal. Tripathy allegedly helped one Ranjan Kumar Das of Swastik India Multi State Credit Cooperative Society Limited. Das benefited from the state government. He raised money through recurring and retirement schemes in contravention of the law, but was rewarded with a nomination to the Odisha State Cooperative Council, the government body which makes policy decisions in the state cooperative sector. The nomination allowed him to gain in stature and thus benefit his business. Biswal, on the other hand, was in the dock for his alleged dubious land deal with the Seashore

Group of Companies whose owner faces thirty-nine criminal cases and who was also said to be involved in a Ponzi scheme.

It was a close shave for Naveen when it came to chit funds. He was seen gracing the 2011 launch of a news channel started by Seashore, whose owner later spent years in jail for involvement in the organized cheating. Twenty lakh investors in Odisha are believed to have been defrauded of about ₹5000 crore by Ponzi firms such as Seashore, but at the height of the fraud the Odisha government lent the Seashore group credibility by entering into a clutch of partnerships with it in sectors such as health, pharma, dairy and food processing. Each of the tie-ups flopped as Seashore lacked both the intent and the expertise, but it had a field day until the bubble burst and the CBI came knocking.

The twin scams shook the people's confidence in Naveen's government. But criticism against the chief minister was generally conspicuous by its absence. Asharani Panda, a housewife from Balasore, lost her life's saving to a Ponzi firm, lured by its attractive interest rates. As she rued her fate, she refrained from railing against Naveen. 'He is a good man, but all his men are crooks. It is they who ruined me,' she said. Prakash Senapati, a small-time trader in Koraput, lost around ₹1 lakh to a Ponzi firm, but preferred to blame everyone else but Naveen. 'The chief minister is a nice man and does not make money. But others in his team have huge appetites and can even swallow elephants,' he explained, gesturing

with his hands to show how greedy the ruling party men were.

Those cheated by the chit funds formed associations and are still fighting legal battles for refunds. They accused the state of turning a blind eye to their plight, but few levelled charges of personal culpability against Naveen. For the overwhelming majority of those defrauded by the chit fund firms, Naveen's individual integrity is beyond reproach.

As the Ponzi schemes unravelled, the chief minister quickly attempted to dissociate himself from all those who came under the cloud. Unlike Mamata Banerjee, his more vociferous counterpart in West Bengal, who screamed and shouted, alleging a Central government plot to undermine her by implicating her ministers, MPs and MLAs in similar scams, Naveen did not publicly bat for his jailed partymen. Many believe they paid the price for the chief minister's time-tested credo – 'from the moment you are caught, you are on your own'. For most Odias, Naveen has already enforced in his home state the principle of '*Na khaunga, na khaney dunga*' (Neither will I take bribes, nor will I allow anyone else to take them) long before Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated it in a rousing speech. That corruption exists in Odisha on the ground, in spite of Naveen, is a different story altogether.

Aside from his anti-corruption image, bolstering Naveen's reputation has been the quiet work that has been undertaken at the grassroots level in Odisha. Panchanan Kanungo, once Naveen's finance minister, is no more

in the good books of the chief minister. Kanungo lost his re-election bid from his assembly constituency in Gobindpur and Naveen, true to character, put him in cold storage. Kanungo pointed to an array of affirmative actions that the government had undertaken soon after Naveen became chief minister. Many of the measures were not big-ticket announcements, but they made huge differences across villages and panchayats. Hand receipt accounts (HRA) – unauthenticated receipts for money supposedly paid to vendors – that allowed engineering department staff to inflate expenses were done away with, tenders were made compulsory in awarding contracts and lotteries were made mandatory for allocation of houses under the Indira Awaas Yojana. ‘Good image instils greater confidence, but people also want good results,’ said Kanungo. ‘Naveen did not disappoint.’

But a top bureaucrat who worked closely with the chief minister had another, altogether more cynical explanation for Naveen’s continuing popularity. ‘His biggest achievement is that he has not done anything that is spectacularly wrong,’ the official said. In a state where earlier chief ministers were known to lurch from one blunder to another, Naveen set a new benchmark of not making wrong decisions.

Janardan Pati, a veteran leader of the CPM and currently member of its central committee, attributed much of Naveen’s success to his non-interfering and non-oppressive ways, his light touch. The veteran Marxist cited a recent example to illustrate his point. Thousands of anganwadi workers converged on Bhubaneswar in

the autumn of 2017 to press their demands, including a wage hike. The protesting women, noisy and itching for a showdown, blocked a city thoroughfare for more than a month. Unlike other state governments which probably would have cracked down on them, Naveen's administration looked the other way. The women were allowed to squat on the road, disrupt traffic and vent their anger until they got tired and their tempers cooled down. They dispersed and went back home several weeks after they had arrived, though the government met their demand only partially by agreeing to a marginal raise in their salary.

According to Pati, Naveen's non-confrontational approach had also bailed him out of what could have been the chief minister's 'Nandigram moment'. Nandigram, in West Bengal's Midnapore district, was the CPM-led Left Front government's Waterloo, where a farmers' protest against land acquisition for industry led to a violent crackdown and the death of fourteen people in 2007. The deaths and the brutality unleashed jointly by the police and the CPM goons outraged Bengal and the rest of the country. It eroded farmer and middle-class support for the communists, who had been ruling the state for more than three decades, and resulted in the decimation of the CPM government in elections a few years later.

Naveen, too, had come close to confronting his own Nandigram at Kalinganagar in Jajpur district in 2006. Some 30,000 acres of land had been handed over years ago to the Odisha Industrial Infrastructure Development Corporation (IIDCO) to set up the Kalinganagar

Industrial Complex. The land acquired included 13,000 acres owned by tribals and government land on which locals cultivated. Nothing happened for years until IIDCO parcelled out the land to private companies, including the Tatas. But when the Tatas arrived to take possession of their land, the tribals protested, demanding higher compensation, at current market rates. They were angry that IIDCO had bought their land in 1994 at ₹37,000 an acre, but sold it to the Tatas some years later at ₹3,50,000 an acre.

Trouble erupted in 2006 and the angry tribals attacked and killed a policeman. The police retaliated, killing thirteen tribals and chopping off the slain protesters' hands. The situation was explosive and could have got infinitely worse. Besides damaging Naveen's administrative record, the deaths were ammunition for political opponents to whip up passions against him. Angry tribals blocked the highway connecting mineral-rich Daitari to the port of Paradip for a year and political rivals kept making incendiary speeches. Unlike the CPM in West Bengal, Naveen did not send in police or partymen to wrest back control and end the blockade. He didn't visit Kalinganagar even once in the immediate wake of the firing. As time went by, the Tatas struck deals with the tribals, who had many of their demands met. The courts, too, intervened a year later and ordered the removal of the blockade. The Tata steel plant came up over time and is currently running full steam, belching out smoke from its huge chimneys. A memorial to the fallen tribals, not far away from the plant, perhaps remains the only visible

reminder of the strife that Kalinganagar experienced. Peace restored, Naveen went back to administering the state as if nothing had happened.



At no place are people happier with their chief minister than in Hinjilicut, the constituency in Ganjam that has already elected Naveen four times to the assembly. Hinjilicut is mostly rural, spread over twenty-one panchayats comprising fifty-seven villages. The region has more access to irrigation and the lush fields, famous for producing vegetables, stand silent testimony to the relative prosperity of its residents. 'The going has been good,' said Debabrata Sahu, the local block development officer. N. Raghunath, a BJD man and the local block chairman, also agreed that Hinjilicut has been on the road to prosperity ever since Naveen took over.

Being the chief minister's constituency comes with privileges. Not far away from the periphery of the crowded Hinjilicut town stands a sprawling hospital compound amid a vast expanse of agricultural fields. Sankara Nethralaya, the non-profitable charitable trust headquartered in Chennai, has set up a superspeciality eye hospital in the area, serving as a proof of the prized status that the assembly segment has come to enjoy.

The region abounds with more proof of its exalted status. Each village in the constituency is connected with all-weather roads and enjoys piped water supply. Electricity connectivity is 100 per cent and the

achievement of the target to build toilets in rural homes has touched almost 98 per cent, with some 20,727 toilets already built out of the total 22,679 planned. The target to build pucca houses under the government's rural housing scheme has also been almost fulfilled, with local officials struggling to identify the balance 260 new beneficiaries for 2018. More benefits are on their way for Odisha's No. 1 assembly constituency. A high-tech bus stand with all modern amenities is planned at a cost of ₹15 crore, a new 100-bed hospital is coming up at a cost of ₹25 crore and a food processing plant is planned.

Challenges remain, and the open sewage drains that meander alongside Hinjilicut town's narrow roads are one of them. Toilets are being built in very large numbers, but people's sanitation habits are proving difficult to change. It's still difficult to disembark from a car and not step on festering human excreta on the roadside. Residents prefer to venture out under the cover of darkness and defecate in the open. But amid the accumulated filth, local officials say seeds of change are being sown. 'Things are only getting better. With more awareness, people too will change their habits,' said Debabrata Sahu. Having worked earlier in other small towns, Sahu finds Hinjilicut to be the best place to work in. 'It is the chief minister's constituency and government files move fast. Red tape is not a problem and mobilizing resources for schemes and projects is far easier here,' he said.

Hinjilicut's new-found prosperity shows up in Naveen's handsome victory margins. In 2000, he won with a margin of 26,417 votes. In 2004, it was 24,624 which



swelled to 61,273 in 2009. In 2014, the chief minister won with a margin of 76,586 votes.

‘My work speaks for itself,’ said the chief minister in a rare interview to *India Today* magazine recently. To administer the state with an estimated 100 lakh households spread over 1,17,000 habitations, including 58,000 revenue villages, spread across forests, hills and valleys, the chief minister relies heavily on the bureaucracy, a reliance that has often brought him criticism. Even ruling party members are miffed at the influence that IAS officers carry with the chief minister. Ministers too are not happy as they survive only at the mercy of Naveen while bureaucrats seemingly carry greater influence. ‘It’s a government by, of and for the third floor,’ said an aggrieved minister, referring to some influential bureaucrats who reportedly control everything from the chief minister’s office on the third floor of the state secretariat.

However maligned or misunderstood, the bureaucrats delivered when another deadly storm, Cyclone Phailin, struck the state in October 2013 and threatened death and destruction on the same scale as the 1999 supercyclone. This cyclone, too, had winds of over 220 kilometres an hour at its peak. Nineteen of the state’s thirty districts were in its path, endangering 130 lakh people. But unlike the last time when the supercyclone caught Odisha ill-prepared, leaving 10,000 people dead and the survivors drowning in distress, ‘Team Naveen’ was largely successful in mitigating human suffering. Days before the cyclone made its landfall, Mission Zero Casualty was launched

and a concerned chief minister trooped into the office of the special relief commissioner on a Sunday to take stock. Around 10 lakh people from some of the most vulnerable locations were physically shifted to safety. As the cyclone hit, raged and passed, only 21 lives were lost.

‘It’s only efficiency that is at a premium under Naveen,’ gushed a senior serving bureaucrat. Only those who are honest, efficient and also modest find favour in Naveen’s dispensation. Bureaucrats are effusive in their praise of the non-interfering chief minister and are proud of what has been achieved so far. The statistics they reel out justifies their pride – the size of Odisha’s economy increased by about five times in real terms between 2000 and 2017 and the real per capita income grew from ₹14,862 to ₹61,678. India’s per capita grew faster, though, standing at ₹82,269 in 2017 compared to ₹16,555 in 2000–01. But Odisha has surpassed the national average in bringing down poverty, which declined by 24.6 percentage points, from 57.2 per cent in 2004–05 to 32.6 per cent in 2011, against the national average, which declined by 15.3 per cent, from 37.2 per cent to 21.9 per cent, during the same period. Odisha’s food grain production has more than doubled from 55.4 lakh tonnes to 118.3 lakh tonnes. India’s food grain production, meanwhile, increased from 1968 lakh tonnes to 2720 lakh tonnes.

Once in deficit and forced to import food from Punjab and Haryana, Odisha now is a surplus state in rice production and the third largest contributor to the country’s rice granary.

The state, officials say, is in much better health

today than ever in the past. The infant mortality rate has dropped by 25 points and is now on a par with the national average of 40 (that is, there are 40 deaths of children under the age of one per 1000 live births). Maternal mortality also declined from 367 in 1998 (this refers to the number of deaths of mothers per 1,00,000 live births) to 222 in 2012–13, though the state has to do more to be on a par with the national average, which dropped from 407 to 167 during the same period. An innovative cash transfer scheme, ‘Mamata’, for 25 lakh pregnant and nursing mothers helped reduce infant and mother mortality rates, and the scheme was replicated by the Central government.

The state’s finances are seemingly in much better health. The state’s own tax–gross state domestic product (GSDP) ratio increased from 3.56 per cent in 1999–2000 to 6.03 per cent in 2016–17; own non-tax–GSDP ratio increased from 1.50 per cent in 1999–2000 to 2.05 per cent in 2016–17; total own revenue–GSDP ratio increased from 5.05 per cent to 8.08 per cent in the same period. This implies that revenue collection improved enormously. The quality of the state’s expenditure has also reportedly got better. The expenditure on salary as a percentage of state’s own revenue (SoR) came down from 160.57 per cent in 1999–2000 to about 60 per cent in 2016–17; total committed expenditure, comprising salary, pension and interest payment, is also down to 91.95 per cent from 240.15 per cent. The list of the advances and achievements made during Naveen’s tenure, officials claim, is very long.

There have, of course, been some failures too, some of them monumental. These include the botched plan to set up a giant steel plant in Paradip on Odisha's coast. Naveen had signed an agreement amid massive fanfare with the South Korean steel giant POSCO for a 12 billion tonne plant to be built at a cost of ₹52,000 crore. Billed as the single biggest foreign investment in India, the proposed steel plant was marketed as a showpiece by the Naveen government to pluck the state out of poverty and backwardness and put it on the road to prosperity. It was presented as a project that would help utilize the state's natural resources, generate employment, provide livelihoods and change the face of Odisha for the better. However, the project got nowhere. Locals resisted moves to acquire their land for the plant and a popular agitation beat back every attempt by the administration to get the project going. Finally, POSCO gave up, announcing they were not interested any more. It was a huge loss of face for Naveen and opened him up to public derision.

There have been other setbacks, too. Despite all the talk of better human development indices, the state still makes news often for the wrong reasons. Human misery and deprivation are rampant and tens of thousands live in abject penury. Dana Majhi, a poor tribal of Kalahandi district, made international headlines in 2016 when he was forced to carry the body of his dead wife for several kilometres with his daughter walking by his side and crying inconsolably. His wife had died in a hospital which had no ambulances or a hearse van, and Majhi had no money to hire a vehicle to transport the body home.

Majhi's desperation highlighted the indignity, both in life and in death, that people routinely bear in the state. The death of nineteen children in three months in the remote Nagada cluster of villages in Jajpur district was a human and also a public relations disaster. The government said the deaths were due to an outbreak of pneumonia and measles but opponents insisted malnutrition was the cause. It sullied Naveen's image.

The blemishes allow critics to take potshots at him. 'All talk of development is delusion. The bottom line is that Odisha is still high on despair and low on hope,' contended Biswajit Mohanty, an environmental-cum-RTI activist, fiercely critical of Naveen.

But the chief minister makes up for the bad publicity by collecting goodwill with, for example, every helping of rice and dalma (watery lentil with vegetables) served at places such as the tin-roofed rectangular hall adjacent to the city bus stand outside the Bhubaneswar railway station. It is here the government of Naveen Patnaik feeds people on a first come, first served basis for just ₹5 a meal. Called Aahar, the canteens, launched all over Odisha by Naveen, form a part of a welfare initiative that evidently has been copied by the chief minister from the Amma Canteens run by the Tamil Nadu government of J. Jayalalithaa.

Naveen and Jayalalithaa were supposed to be friends, sharing many similarities. Both were lonely in private life and both ran their respective political parties as their fiefdom. Politicians say that when it comes to inner party democracy, even the more mercurial Mamata Banerjee's

Trinamool Congress fares better than Jayalalithaa's All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) or Naveen's BJD.

Naveen and Jayalalithaa, it turns out, also shared a liking for populist schemes, commonly called sops. Jayalalithaa showered sops and more sops on her people during her lifetime. The Amma Canteens were her most successful signature sop and Naveen had them replicated in Odisha.

Strategically located outside bus stations, railway stations and state hospitals, the Aahar canteens target the poor. There are 111 of them being run across the state's thirty districts with money coming from state-run corporations such as the Odisha Mining Corporation. Local-level organizations such as rice miller associations also contribute. The food served is hot and hygienic and Naveen, whose giant posters cover the canteen walls end to end, is earning the good wishes of the 67,000 people who eat at the outlets every day. The inside walls of the canteen outside the Bhubaneswar railway station have no less than fourteen Naveen posters, but even visually impaired citizens like Shib Charan Raut from Jagatsinghpur are impressed with the chief minister. 'The chief minister is very kind. I see a better future for people like us,' Raut said, while savouring the rice and dalma with two companions who similarly could not see Naveen's face smiling at them from the posters.

Many others who come to eat at the Aahar canteens share similar views. Run at an annual expenditure of ₹32 crore, the food served at the subsidized canteens has

become so popular that the banquet manager of a hotel not far from the Aahar centre outside the Bhubaneswar railway station visits the canteen stealthily a couple of times a week to have a cheap but nutritious meal. Given the noble intention behind the canteens, no political party has come out in public to criticize the initiative. But they do say Naveen has, just like Jayalalithaa, mastered the art of squandering money on subsidies and sops. 'The sops make people happy. Though the state may not have progressed, people feel satisfied,' said Rita Ray, a retired professor of sociology at Utkal University. Sanjaya Kumar Jena, a journalist who runs the digital TV website TheArgus.In, agreed that the sops and subsidies serve the chief minister well. 'His sops scratch the surface and do not address the real issues, but they help in giving people a false high and keep them happy,' he said.

The poor, the infirm, the disabled, the retired, the tribals, old women, young women, pregnant mothers, lactating mothers – you name any section of people and Naveen, in all likelihood, has a sop or two for them. His government runs more than thirty welfare schemes, such as the Gopabandhu Grameen Yojana (for rural development), Biju Pucca Ghar Yojana (for building brick houses), Madhu Babu Pension Yojana (for providing pension to the poor and infirm), Mukhya Mantri Sadak Yojana (for roads), Biju Atma Nijukti Yojana (for self-employment) and Biju Setu Yojana (for building bridges). These schemes are meant to expedite development and provide relief in certain key areas. In addition, Naveen has been intervening and reaching out to his people with

bespoke innovative measures. It started in 2004 when he announced a compensation of ₹25,000 for any tribal falling ill from contaminated food. If any tribal woman was sexually exploited, she would get a compensation of ₹50,000. More interestingly, if the wage earner in a tribal family was to be imprisoned in a case for more than ten years, his family would be given a grant of ₹50,000 by the government.

In 2005, the Odisha government announced free uniforms and cycles to about 14 lakh students in 142 educationally backward blocks of the state, besides an insurance cover of ₹25,000 each for 68 lakh school children in the state. The Madhu Babu Pension Yojana, started in 2008, promised a monthly payout to 43 lakh people at a cost of ₹700 crore annually. Widows of any age, leprosy patients, those with mental health issues or with cerebral palsy were among those entitled for assistance under the scheme named after Madhusudan Das, the man who led the movement for the creation of a separate Odisha state.

From time to time, the Naveen government comes up with new schemes covering newer sections of the community. It gave free cycles to 1.7 lakh girl students studying in class 10 in government and government-aided schools and introduced assistance of ₹5000 to pregnant and lactating women. Free cycles to girls were followed by free cycles to 1.6 lakh students in the below poverty line (BPL) category. In 2012, the government gave ₹200 each to 37 lakh senior citizens, widows and physically challenged persons to buy blankets. Free umbrellas



were distributed to 33 lakh widows, destitutes and the differently abled. In a God-fearing state where Lord Jagannath rules the hearts and minds, even servitors of the Puri temple have not been forgotten. The government promised free houses to those among them without home or land, free education and scholarships ranging from ₹100 to ₹500 to their children studying in classes 1 to 10 and ₹25,000 for those pursuing technical education, besides an insurance cover of ₹2 lakh for their families.

The measures, big and small, go a long way in garnering goodwill for the chief minister. But the biggest game changer of all was in 2008 when Naveen announced 25 kilos of rice at only ₹2 a kilo for the 55 lakh BPL families in the state. Rice at this rate was also made available to all families, irrespective of their income, in the historically poorer districts of undivided Kalahandi, Bolangir and Koraput. The rice scheme established the chief minister's welfare credentials and helped him win votes in the assembly elections in 2009. Among everything else that he did to stay on the right side of popular sentiments, including replacing about 30 per cent of sitting MLAs with fresh faces as party candidates, the rice scheme brought him the biggest and best dividend. Subsequently he bettered the rice scheme in 2013, providing rice at only ₹1 to 48 lakh BPL families in the state. Needless to say, the beneficiaries of the scheme are seen as the strongest section of the chief minister's support base today.

The rice scheme caused immense heartburn among Naveen's opponents and sparked a political slugfest with the BJP. Eyeing to unseat Naveen in 2019 and

seize political power in the state, BJP Central ministers accused Naveen of appropriating credit for schemes that are bankrolled by the Central government. 'It is not Naveen rice, but Modi rice,' insisted union minister Prakash Javadekar during a visit to Odisha for the purpose of strengthening the party's organization and boosting the morale of its workers. According to BJP leaders, the rice that Naveen has been providing to the people for ₹1 actually costs ₹32 a kilo. Of this, the Central government pays ₹29 a kilo, the state government pays ₹2 and the consumer pays ₹1. The commonest grouse consequently among BJP leaders in the state is that the chief minister has been running away with all the credit though he does not deserve it.

But politics is also about perceptions and Naveen has been winning on that score squarely over the years. Rivals say the ruling BJD adopts practices, often unfair, to appropriate publicity and the resultant goodwill. They allege that block-level government officials tell beneficiaries of houses under the Indira Awaas Yojana to put up plaques proclaiming 'Biju Patnaik Awaas' though the subsidy for the scheme is borne by the Central government. With the BJD in power for more than eighteen years, local officials have allegedly become extensions of the ruling party and are accused of being partisan. Outlets that distribute subsidized rice at ₹1 carry pictures of a smiling, 'benevolent' chief minister. At some places, the opposition alleges, recipients are told that Naveen is the benefactor.

With a strength of some 41 lakh members, the ruling

BJD manages to dictate and dominate the messages across the state. The party is in expansion mode, with the aim to publicize Naveen's pro-poor work more effectively. Efforts are under way to induct at least twenty-one members per ward for party work, which would translate into 231 party members per gram panchayat. 'Of course, we want to publicize the work the government has been doing. That's the sure-shot way of warding off anti-incumbency,' said Pratap Keshari Deb, a Rajya Sabha MP and the principal spokesperson of the party. The party machinery, including its six field organizations which cover youth, women, OBCs and other targeted groups, helps continuously to drive home the point that there is no one better than Naveen in the state. Popular acceptance of the TINA – there is no alternative – theory has so far worked to the ruling party's advantage.

Given the party's organization, it is no surprise that the residents of Juang Sahi, a tribal village of thirty-seven households in the remote Telkoi block in Keonjhar district, are convinced that Naveen is their sole saviour. 'It is Naveen Babu who has been giving us the rice,' insisted Damodar Juang, slightly high on his evening handia, the locally manufactured brew. Others not so intoxicated agreed readily, nodding in approval at Naveen's name. The chief minister was the only one they were familiar with among Odisha politicians, though they said they had heard the name of Prime Minister Modi as well.

The BJP, therefore, is seeking to counter what it calls the 'misinformation' and highlight the contributions of Modi. The party's primary objective is to counter

the BJD's choreographed narrative of Naveen being an extremely caring ruler, who personally has given people everything from pensions to rice and blankets, cycles and shoes. Attempting to expand its footprint in states such as Odisha, where its presence has been negligible so far, BJP Central ministers are doing the rounds of the state regularly, telling people that the majority of Naveen's schemes are actually the generosity of Prime Minister Modi. The biggest political slugfest is over taking credit for the subsidized rice. The rice is given cheap, but the political dividend the scheme fetches is huge and the BJP has launched a grassroots campaign to raise awareness among ordinary citizens that it is a Central government scheme. The party is hoping that once people are convinced that they don't owe the subsidized rice scheme to Naveen's largesse, his charisma will dim considerably.

The challenge mounted by the BJP is something of a new experience for Naveen. The opposition in the state had been in disarray ever since he first became chief minister in 2000. 'Naveen was fortunate since he was never really seriously challenged all these years. He kept getting walkovers after walkovers,' said Rabi Das, the Bhubaneswar-based political commentator. The Congress lacked a leader or a talking point and never managed to mount a serious challenge to the BJD. In early 2004, the Congress attempted to resurrect its fortunes by bringing back J.B. Patnaik as the state party president. Though unpopular, Patnaik was an organizational man and the party hoped he would be in a position to pull off a miracle in time for the next assembly elections in 2005. Naveen,

however, pulled the rug from under their feet by ordering snap polls. J.B. Patnaik was made the Pradesh Congress Committee (PCC) chief on 14 January 2004 and Naveen ordered the dissolution of the state assembly and early elections on 29 January.

The BJP has fared no better. It was a Naveen ally until 2009. When it fell out with him, the saffron party had neither a leader nor the organizational might to take on the BJD. It was only after it attained power in Delhi in 2014 that it began to seriously flex its muscles, hoping to ride on Prime Minister Modi's charm to counter Naveen's charisma.

But checkmating Naveen isn't going to be easy. Opposition leaders, big and small, have, over the years, hurled every possible accusation at the chief minister without making any impact. Snide remarks and comments have also been passed, and the chief minister's sexuality has been questioned, even though this has nothing to do with politics. But Naveen has survived the concerted attacks, both on his person and on the party. 'The combined credibility of all opposition leaders put together has so far not been able to match the credibility that Naveen has come to enjoy as an individual,' said Rita Ray, the Utkal University sociology professor.

Members of one group, in particular, vouch vociferously for the chief minister's integrity. These are an overwhelming majority of Odisha's 200 lakh women, the chief minister's trusted vote bank. Naveen is a bachelor, but his emotional bonding with the state's womenfolk is remarkable. Soon after he became chief minister,

he set his eyes on setting up self-help groups (SHGs) for women across Odisha's rural landscape. Branded 'Mission Shakti', the initiative caught on and became a movement. Odisha now has about 6 lakh SHGs. Each group has about ten members. That makes it about 60 lakh women who presumably have benefited from easy bank loans and set up their own enterprises. They are all Naveen's committed voters.

These committed voters include women like Anupama Behera of Gopinathpur in Ganjam district and her neighbours, Sajani Behera and Geeta Behera. Their lives did not count for much earlier. But once SHGs began to be formed, they too floated their own – the Biswakarma Self-Help Group – and were helped to gain access to easy loans. Today, the group of women makes packaged chatua (a ready-to-eat fortified powder of wheat, dal, cashew, etc.) that the district administration buys for distribution among mothers to feed their infants. They also collect payments for electricity bills in their neighbourhood for a fee of ₹5 for every bill collected. Work is hard, but also remunerative. Each member makes an average of ₹5000 a month. 'Our value at home has gone up. We are taken more seriously,' says Sajani Behera. Anupama Behera, who can now afford to pay the fees of her son pursuing a Bachelor of Technology degree, agreed. 'I am now the man at home,' she said, grinning proudly.

Village after village in Odisha now abounds with such positive tales of empowerment. Helped with loans at nominal interest rates, women have got together to weave and realize their dreams. From fishing, agriculture

and horticulture to making bangles and bindis, the women's collectives are into myriad activities, but all with the common objective of empowering women. That they are doing well is borne out by the latest National Family Welfare Survey, which shows that the percentage of women owning land individually or jointly is much higher in Odisha than elsewhere. It is 63.5 per cent in Odisha compared to the national average of 38.4 per cent. The percentage of women involved in household decision-making also stands at a healthy 81.8 per cent. Empowerment of women has also meant more of them taking up public responsibilities. Around 60,000 women are playing decisive roles in Odisha currently, on being elected to panchayati raj institutions from gram panchayats to zilla parishads.

Reaping the benefits, tens of thousands of Odisha women readily give their chief minister the credit for the change in their lives. 'But for him, this would not have been possible,' said Anupama Behera of Biswakarma SHG. 'The SHGs are Naveen's biggest political capital,' admitted Panchanan Kanungo, the former finance minister. Besides the SHGs, the women are also appreciative of Naveen's quiet ways. 'The chief minister's silence, after all, is his eloquence,' explained Professor Kishor Kumar Basa of Utkal University. 'Naveen has given the women of the state a sense of security that no other chief minister had given,' said Pratap Keshari Deb, Rajya Sabha MP.

With women firmly behind him, winning elections has been fairly easy for Naveen. In 2000, only 54 per cent of the eligible women voters came out to vote. But

in 2014, the elections in which Naveen withstood and worsted the Modi wave, the turnout of women was as high as 74 per cent. With women coming out in such large numbers, it wasn't difficult to guess who would win. Never shy of entertaining people with the most quotable quotes, irrespective of how tough it had been for his own Congress party, veteran politician Suresh Kumar Routray summed it up inimitably, '*Odishara stree mane Naveenanka sathire preeti karichhanti*' (Odisha's women are in love with Naveen).

Routray's remarks came hours after the 2014 results were declared. Women rooted for Naveen, routing both the BJP and the Congress. In an assembly of 147 members, the Congress won only 16 seats. Ahead of the counting, the BJP state president Kanak Vardhan Singh Deo had pompously predicted an impending tsunami. Of course, a tsunami struck, but it swept away the BJP, which won only 10 assembly seats and just one out of the state's 21 Lok Sabha seats. Naveen's BJD on the other hand won 116 assembly seats and 20 of the 21 Lok Sabha seats.



5

## The 2019 Challenge



‘Oh! I’ve got a problem,’ Naveen Patnaik burst out spontaneously, before falling quiet quickly.

The year was 2000. It was the evening that assembly election results were being announced and Naveen was headed for a thumping victory. He was on the way to Soochana Bhavan, the state information centre, and other television channel studios for live interviews. I was with him in his car. He was sitting in the front, beside the driver; I was in the back. Those were the pre-EVM days and counting was still under way and results of several seats were awaited. In some, trends were known, but official announcements of who won and who lost were still to be made. As results were confirmed and friends called on my mobile, I relayed them to Naveen. X has won from here, Y has lost from there – I kept updating him. Naveen merely listened, poker-faced. He simply soaked in whatever information I offered him. But then came the result from Pallahara, an assembly constituency in the central Anugul district, and Naveen’s ears pricked up. Naveen’s BJD had contested the elections in an alliance with the BJP and the winning candidate from Pallahara

was the BJP's Dharmendra Pradhan. The moment I broke the news that Pradhan had won, Naveen said, 'Oh! I've got a problem.'

Son of the then union minister of state for surface transport, Debendra Pradhan, Dharmendra was a little-known figure in 2000. An activist of the BJP's student wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), and a former student union leader of Utkal University, Dharmendra was contesting elections for the first time. Nobody thought much of him and many within the state BJP felt he would, at best, have a temporary presence. Odisha, like every other state, had been replete with instances of leaders who faded into oblivion after winning one or two elections and many felt Dharmendra would be no different.

But Naveen thought differently and blurted out his concern over Pradhan's victory in a rare moment of candour.

Almost two decades later, and ahead of the twin Lok Sabha and assembly elections in 2019, the chief minister's judgement is proving correct. The BJP is beginning to challenge Naveen's uninterrupted reign and it is Dharmendra, now in his late forties, who is leading the charge. Having won as an MLA in 2000, Dharmendra became an MP in 2004 after successfully contesting from the Deogarh parliamentary constituency. He suffered a setback in 2009 when he chose to contest for the assembly and lost, but by then the hardworking and ambitious Dharmendra had made enough contacts in the nation's capital to build a successful political career.

First, he became the BJP national secretary and then the general secretary. By 2012, he was important enough for the party to arrange for him to be elected to the Rajya Sabha from Bihar. When the NDA, led by the BJP, swept the 2014 polls and Narendra Modi became prime minister, Dharmendra became the union minister of state for petroleum and natural gas with independent charge. He has continued to be in the good books of the prime minister, who publicly commended him for delivering on ambitious Central government schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana which provides subsidized LPG connections to BPL households. In 2017, when Modi expanded his cabinet, Dharmendra was promoted and made a full-fledged cabinet minister. Besides petroleum and natural gas, he now also has the ministry of skill development and entrepreneurship under his command, apparently two of the prime minister's core focus areas.

Fired partly by his own political ambitions and partly by the powerful position he currently holds, Dharmendra finds himself pitted against Naveen, though the BJP plans to rely heavily on Prime Minister Modi's appeal to counter the Odisha chief minister's image during the next assembly elections scheduled for 2019. Odisha also accounts for another senior Central minister – tribal affairs minister Jual Oram – but the better networked Dharmendra is perceived by many as the party's more credible chief ministerial candidate. He is the most visible, if not the tallest, figure among BJP leaders in Odisha and hardly a week passes without Dharmendra attending a

huge rally or leading a cavalcade of cars and party workers into the remotest corners to storm what are known to be BJD citadels. Though now re-elected to the Rajya Sabha from Madhya Pradesh, and constantly travelling around the country and the globe as an influential union minister, Dharmendra keeps Odisha central to his political priorities. He visits his home state so frequently that one of his partymen told a journalist colleague recently, 'Muku Bhai [Muku is Dharmendra's pet name] leaves Odisha only to come back the next day or the day after. He is never away from the state for long.'

But what exactly set the alarm bells ringing for Naveen about Dharmendra, who back in 2000 looked no different from many other politicians?

A top IAS officer who served Naveen for a long time insisted that Naveen possesses 'X-ray eyes'. He is suspicious by nature. The moment he sees a person, he sizes him up, without letting the person know what he is thinking of him. 'Naveen's gut feelings are strong and he relies heavily on them,' another senior official explained. Those who have worked with him closely say that Naveen hides his emotions well. He may have a very poor opinion of someone, but the person will never get to know that. On the contrary, it is more likely that the chief minister's warm hospitality would have floored him and the person may go away thinking he has made a good impression on Naveen. This happened with Dharmendra in 2000. A few days after his 'Oh! I've got a problem' remark, Naveen met Dharmendra in the assembly when the new House convened to welcome the newly elected legislators.

The chief minister congratulated the first-time MLA profusely and said how happy he was seeing Dharmendra win. Naveen, after all, can never be faulted for failing to show courtesy.

But there is no room for such niceties in electoral politics and the battle for 2019 is hotting up by the day with no holds barred. Winning Odisha has become a critical prestige battle for the BJP. Having swept much of the Hindi heartland in 2014 – it won as many as 73 of the 80 Lok Sabha seats with its allies in Uttar Pradesh, 27 out of 29 seats in Madhya Pradesh and all the 25 seats in Rajasthan – there is not much room to improve its tally in those states. It is more likely that the BJP's numbers will slip in the states where it had swept the polls in 2014 and the party will look to compensate the expected losses by picking up seats from newer territories. Odisha, with 21 Lok Sabha seats, is a new frontier for the BJP where it expects to establish its footprint, alongside other states in the country's east and north-east. It has wrested power in Assam, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura, shares power in Bihar and is trying hard to make inroads into West Bengal. Political pundits say that Odisha holds better promise for the party than Bengal, where the BJP is still struggling to make its mark. In Odisha, it has already stunned everyone, including its rivals, with its improved showing in the 2017 panchayat polls.

The panchayat poll results bewildered many and left the BJP buoyant. Compared to its dismal showing in the 2014 general elections, or for that matter in the previous panchayat polls of 2012, the BJP performed creditably in

2017. The ruling BJD emerged as the single largest party, winning 473 of the state's 853 zilla parishad seats, but what got everyone talking was the BJP's much improved tally. The BJP won 297 zilla parishad seats, compared to the paltry 36 it won in 2012. After having spent most of its existence in Odisha on the sidelines or latching on to a bigger partner as a sidekick, the saffron outfit burst into prominence after the panchayat polls. The surprise results saw it becoming the principal opposition party, relegating the Congress to third spot in the state. As against 128 zilla parishad seats that the Congress had won in 2012, this time it won just 60.

The significance of the panchayat polls was huge. No less than 142 of the state's 147 assembly segments, barring only Bhubaneswar Central, Barabati, Rourkela, Sambalpur and Berhampur, have rural constituents which voted in the panchayat polls, providing a measure of what was considered the popular mood across the state. The number of voters was also huge and nearly as large as that in the last general elections. Some 204 lakh voters voted in the panchayat polls compared to the turnout of 215 lakh for the 2014 Lok Sabha and assembly polls. Given the scale and spread of the panchayat vote, the results triggered speculation about Odisha's political future. The BJD did come on top with 40.81 per cent of the vote, but with the BJP securing 33.03 per cent, almost double of the 17.99 per cent it had secured during the 2014 polls, many saw in the panchayat poll outcome the first signs of an impending change.

In terms of actual numbers, the differences between



the BJD and the BJP are interesting. Out of the total 204 lakh voters who turned up to cast their ballots, the BJD polled 83.5 lakh votes while the BJP got 67 lakh votes, a difference of about 15 lakh votes. The panchayat poll results, once extrapolated to assembly and parliamentary seats, were more encouraging for the BJP. The results showed that if the people had voted for the assembly in the same manner, the BJP would have won 43 seats as against the 10 it currently holds. If the vote was for the Lok Sabha, the BJP would have won 6 of the 21 seats, compared to the lone seat it won in 2014.

Though still a distant second, the panchayat poll results reflected a definite upswing in the BJP's fortunes in Odisha. It led to several questions being asked: Is a Modi wave at work in Odisha? Why didn't such a wave work in 2014? Why is it beginning to work now? More importantly, is the Naveen magic waning? Is Brand Naveen finally losing its sheen?

Though the debate rages in the absence of ready answers, there is a growing unanimity that the BJP, post 2014, is a transformed outfit in Odisha. It is better organized, more determined and filled with greater purpose. In 2014, Odisha, too, experienced the Modi hawa, but the party did not have the machinery on the ground to convert the wave into votes. Elections are often won or lost at the booth level, and victory depends on which party or candidate is able to mobilize and bring in their voters and get them to cast their votes. The BJP had little presence in 2014 where it mattered the most – in Odisha's 36,000 polling booths. Though the party

proclaimed it would have at least ten members in every booth, it remained an empty claim.

‘Lessons have been learnt and things are changing,’ said Sudipta Ray, a BJP spokesman. Amit Shah, the national president, has been visiting the state regularly, with the sole objective of building a strong organization, right down to the booth level. The party has already undertaken a massive membership drive and now boasts of some 36 lakh members, compared to the 3 lakh members it had in 2014. But the biggest game changer, the party expects, will be its *‘Mo booth sabuthu majboot’* (My booth is the strongest) campaign, where it hopes to enlist at least 60 active members per booth for all the 36,000 booths across the state. The plans are very elaborate. Every booth will have a party organizer and a deputy organizer, in charge of coordinating with booth-level members who will try to win over the loyalty of the voters nearby. According to party insiders, the difference between 2014 and 2017 was booth-level management, with the BJP managing to cover around 80 per cent booths by the time panchayat polls were held.

Unseating the BJD will not be easy, though, with Naveen enjoying a strong connect with the people. His party has been in power for years and has sunk deep roots with every interest group, from businessmen to contractors and touts, collecting around it. Originally voted to power to cleanse the establishment, the BJD is now the establishment itself. The party has a vast organizational structure which has already been set into motion with the next elections in mind. Its biggest asset,

however, is the chief minister's image, which may have frayed a bit around the edges after years in power, but still retains the shine. His appeal was on show on a hot October day in 2017, when he flagged off a special drive to renew the party's contact with the people amid a fresh slogan coined by BJD cheerleaders, '*Nabinanka sathey chaliba, Odisha pai ladiba*' (We will walk with Naveen and fight for Odisha). The chief minister has never been a fiery orator. As mentioned earlier, he prefers to read out an Odia speech written in the roman script. But at the launch of the campaign from Ekamra in Bhubaneswar, there was no dearth of enthusiasm in the crowd. The party is overflowing with resources and spends liberally to spread cheer among its supporters.

The dirty-tricks department of the government is also reportedly active. The state police raided the gas agency that Dharmendra's elder brother runs in the town of Talcher. What was unearthed is not yet known, but the raid was meant to embarrass a rival and made national headlines.

That Naveen will not be an easy pushover was also in evidence when the BJD won the by-election for the assembly seat of Bijepur in western Odisha in early 2018. Billed as a precursor to the 2019 polls, both the BJP and Dharmendra invested huge political capital into the Bijepur campaigning. Dharmendra campaigned extensively and several union ministers joined him in his bid to drum up support for the party candidate. But Naveen proved smarter. The by-election was necessitated by the death of a Congress legislator. Naveen roped in

the deceased MLA's wife to be the BJD candidate, eyeing the sympathy factor. And when a slipper was thrown at Naveen, allegedly by a BJP worker, during an election rally, it swung more public sympathy for Naveen. Even the mother of the man who hurled the slipper was reportedly aghast and chastised her son, saying, 'Why did you have to throw a slipper at an innocent man like Naveen?' Voters of the constituency also spoke in favour of the chief minister when the time came to cast their ballots. The BJD won Bijepur by a margin of more than 41,000 votes.

Faced with the tall task of taking on a party so deeply entrenched, the BJP has drawn up elaborate plans. The panchayat poll results have given it the belief that it has a future in Odisha. Leaders such as Amit Shah believe that the BJP already has a foot in the door, and courtesy the goodwill that exists for Prime Minister Modi in the state, it stands more than a fair chance of scripting an upset in the 2019 polls. Besides strengthening the party organization at the booth level, Shah is focusing on giving the party a statewide reach. The Odisha unit of the BJP will have committees right from the state level down to the block and mandal levels. Party organizations dealing with youth, women, farmers, scheduled castes (SCs), scheduled tribes (STs) and OBCs will also have similar committees at every level. According to Shah's calculations, all these committees, put together, will have 2.5 lakh office-bearers. Of them, the national party president wants at least a lakh to work for the party full-time, until the next elections.

A parallel strategy adopted is to poach leaders from

other political parties, particularly in places where the party lacks an organization or is in need of a leader or a local face with considerable influence who could be fielded as an election candidate. Many Congress partymen are coming over because they see no chance for their party the next time around. Some ruling party members are also switching sides because of the internal political dynamics of the BJD. Many of them have ceded ground to party rivals or have been sidelined. Parking themselves with a resurgent BJP will give them another chance to renew their political careers. 'We are, after all, not entirely a greenfield project,' said Bhuban Mohan Jena, a BJP state committee member. 'Wherever necessary, we will take over other party structures – lock, stock and barrel.'

The defections are being used by the BJP to try to create a perception that the party is in the pole position. In the southern district of Koraput, where two senior local politicians, former Congress chief minister Giridhar Gamang and ex-BJD MP Jayaram Pangi, have joined the party, there is a buzz that the BJP will annihilate its rivals this time. In the coastal districts of Odisha, where the party has been traditionally weak, the infusion of local politicians from other parties is adding to its electoral muscle. Some three dozen leaders, those who had unsuccessfully but creditably contested the last elections as independents or candidates of other parties, have already joined the BJP, bringing along their supporters and probably their individual vote banks. Babita Mallick contested from Binjharpur of Jajpur district in 2014 and polled 55,000 votes. Amar Nayak polled 23,000 votes as

an independent in Badachana, some four times more than what the official BJP candidate had secured. Now that they are officially in the party, the calculations are that these candidates will become more formidable the next time. Convinced that this is a sound election strategy, the party is now on the hunt for at least two dozen local leaders who could plug the party's organizational weakness at strategic places and boost its electoral prospects.

Dissensions within the ruling party, such as the high drama during the fallout that BJD MP Bajjayant 'Jay' Panda had with Naveen in recent months, also fills the BJP with hope. Soft-spoken, suave and very well networked, Panda was the face of the BJD in Delhi. He had been close to Naveen and was made a Rajya Sabha MP in 2000. He continued to be a member of the Upper House till 2009, when he contested the Lok Sabha elections from Kendrapara and won. He was re-elected in 2014.

Panda had his utility for Naveen. Besides occasionally giving him company in the evenings, Panda was rich and influential. His industrialist family had deep pockets and his wife ran OTV, Odisha's most popular television channel, with an unmatched reach. But insiders say relations between Panda and Naveen began to sour ever since the media started speculating about Naveen's health and there was talk that the chief minister would shortly visit London for a liver transplant.

Given his history of sidelining potential rivals and consolidating his own power, it was natural that Naveen

wouldn't trust Panda completely. The MP was too rich and too well connected for the chief minister's comfort. That his wife owned a popular television channel which could be used to push his political agenda was also not lost on Naveen. But whatever be the chief minister's fears, the parting between Panda and Naveen apparently had more to do with the rumours about his health, which the chief minister suspected were the handiwork of Panda. Naveen, it is said, believed that Panda was seeking to position himself for a post-Naveen scenario and project himself as Odisha's future.

Panda denied any wrongdoing, but the process of cutting him down had begun. Over time, the invitations to visit Naveen Niwas dried up and the MP was stripped of his position as the BJD parliamentary party spokesman. As he gradually became persona non grata within the party, he found the going tough. Ruling partymen began opposing his visits to his constituency and he was sometimes physically attacked. Panda, too, vented his frustration time and again, pouring out his angst in newspaper columns over what he felt was the party's gradual passage into 'goondalism and corruption'. He claimed he was responding only to Naveen's call for introspection within the party following the emergence of the BJP as the principal opposition party in the state in the 2017 panchayat polls, but partymen suspected Panda of seeking to wash dirty linen in public in a bid to embarrass the chief minister.

Hyperactive on social media, Panda also took to Twitter to say the BJD had forsaken its principles and

original path. Panda, as to be expected, is reluctant to elaborate on how and why his friendship with Naveen soured. But publicly, his stated position has been that the fallout was over 'ethical issues'. The BJD, those close to him point out, has given up on its anti-graft drive. Unlike in his first twelve years in power when the chief minister seemingly brooked neither the corrupt nor any corruption, he is surprisingly failing to crack down on intransigencies now. True, Naveen still does not publicly bat for those on the wrong side of the law. But strangely, he has been lenient to two ruling party MLAs – Pravata Kumar Tripathy and Pravat Ranjan Biswal – embroiled in the Ponzi scam. Tripathy was suspended from the BJD once he was implicated and was jailed. Despite still facing charges of improprieties, his suspension from the party was inexplicably withdrawn. Biswal on the other hand was never suspended though he spent long months in jail.

Relations between Panda and Naveen soured as the months went by. One thing led to another and in January 2018 Panda accused a certain non-Odia officer in the chief minister's office of protecting antisocial elements. He also issued a press statement alleging this officer was 'interfering in party affairs and unconstitutionally indulging in politics'.

Panda took no names but no one had any doubt that his barb was aimed at V. Karthikeyan Pandian, a 2000 batch IAS officer hailing from Tamil Nadu. It has been Naveen's style to depend on bureaucrats, past or present, rather than his ministers to run the administration. Besides retired bureaucrat Pyari Mohapatra, who once



ran the show from his home, officers such as Santosh Satpathy, who served in the chief minister's office, were also considered very efficient and powerful during their tenure. After Pandian joined the chief minister's office, the impression had gained ground that it was only Pandian who mattered in Naveen's scheme of things.

Fiercely loyal to Naveen, the forty-four-year-old Pandian is from a modest family background. He studied at a government-run sports hostel. He was a middle-distance runner, particularly good at 1500-metre sprints, and cracked the IAS. He first grabbed the chief minister's attention during his time as the collector of Mayurbhanj district. He then impressed the chief minister further when he was the collector of Ganjam, the district within which the chief minister's parliamentary constituency Aska fell. Though the district was notorious for mass migration of labourers, Ganjam, under Pandian, emerged as the best-performing district in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. Naveen was very impressed and drafted Pandian into the chief minister's office.

Pandian sits in on every meeting of the chief minister. Ministers and MLAs queue up before his chambers at one end of a long corridor in the chief minister's secretariat. As his importance has grown, so has the chorus of disapproval. Many ruling partymen resent his proximity to Naveen. Though no evidence has ever emerged, politicians – particularly those disgruntled with the current dispensation – speculate about the wealth he has allegedly amassed. But more than anything else, his

Tamil background, though Pandian is married to an Odia IAS officer, has been seized upon by politicians wanting to settle scores. Some of them, such as former legislator Rama Ranjan Baliarsingh, have specified that Pandian is the reason why they have quit the BJD. 'I cannot bring myself to serve a Tamil. I am a proud Odia,' Baliarsingh said, playing to the gallery at a recent rally. That scores of Odia IAS officers are serving in other states at very senior positions was conveniently ignored.

Jay Panda, too, went down a similar path, targeting the 'non-Odia IAS officer' at a public rally. Ever keen to exploit opportunities, the BJP jumped into the fray and some of its activists stormed and ransacked Pandian's official residence.

Naveen discards aides as and when it suits him. For the moment, the controversy surrounding Pandian suited him, more probably to put Panda down. The MP was suspended from the ruling party and accused of conflict of interest. The BJD said that Panda drew ₹1.45 crore as salary and allowances from his family-owned IMFA, though he was an elected MP. A statement of the ruling party also drew attention to the fact that 'there has been a huge loan waiver running into thousands of crores to IMFA, which is still a subject of debate'. Shown the door but not quite silenced, Panda continued with his public criticism of Naveen for some time. He finally quit the party in May 2018, shortly after his industrialist father Bansidhar Panda died.

The elder Panda had been Odisha's pioneering industrialist, besides being a close friend of Biju Babu,

Naveen's father. The two families were close and Jay Panda called Biju Babu 'Biju Uncle'.

'My father's death was the last straw. I realized I was unwanted in the BJD,' Panda said later. As the senior Panda's body lay for the people to pay their last respects – first at his home in Bomikhal, Bhubaneswar and then at his village home of Madhuban in Baranga – hundreds streamed in, but not a single prominent BJD leader came. Since Naveen did not show up, his partymen stayed away. 'I was heartbroken when several BJD colleagues conveyed that they had been restrained from coming by to pay their last respects to the departed soul. That the BJD does not want me anymore, and in fact wants me out, is now irrefutably clear,' Jay Panda wrote in his emotional resignation letter.

He also took the opportunity to take potshots at Naveen and the administration he ran. Accusing the government of targeting him and anyone associated with him, he wrote, 'these are all reprehensible Stalinist tactics, misusing government powers and do not have any place in a political party of the world's largest democracy in the 21st century'.

Jay Panda's resignation made national news. He quit as a Lok Sabha MP some days later. Stung by the criticism on social media of what many felt was sheer 'meanness' of the BJD top brass in the wake of senior Panda's death, some party leaders did show up for the eleventh-day rituals for the departed soul. They included state minister Prafulla Samal, MP Prasanna Patsani and MLA Debasis Nayak. The BJD men in attendance were, however, far

outnumbered by leaders from other political parties such as BJP's Dharmendra, Giridhar Gamang and state Congress president Niranjan Patnaik.

Jay Panda's exit from the BJD has evidently set tongues wagging, with some national television channels going to the extent of claiming that it could be a game changer in Odisha. 'It's the beginning of the end for Naveen,' predicted a commentator. But back home in Odisha, the jury is still out on what fallout Jay Panda's departure will ultimately have. There are some who believe that Jay Panda has never been a mass leader and would have no lasting impact. 'He is a better-known face in Delhi than in Odisha,' they say. 'He is more of a Twitter tiger,' said a commentator rather disparagingly in a column. There are also some who think that his options are limited. He may finally join the BJP to better his chances of being re-elected as a Lok Sabha MP. Or possibly, he may join the Congress which is without a leader of stature. As long as Naveen is around, it is unlikely that BJD men will ever rally round Jay Panda. He therefore has to look for greener pastures in other political parties, be it in the BJP or in the Congress. Jay Panda's future political journey is pregnant with possibilities, as also uncertainties.



The BJP believes it is the only alternative to Naveen. It has drawn up a blueprint for the 2019 elections and a confidential SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis presented before the

party president weighed its strengths and weaknesses candidly. The strengths, the analysis listed, included the brand name and goodwill of Prime Minister Modi, the success of Central government schemes like the Ujjwala Yojana, under which gas connections have been provided to tens of thousands of BPL households, a proactive and energetic state leadership and huge enthusiasm among the cadre following the heartening outcome of the panchayat elections. The weaknesses were many and they included limited leadership and field presence in coastal and southern districts, lack of star power, with most of the mass media and the cinema world aligned with the ruling party. The analysis, however, found opportunities for the party and they included anti-incumbency, lethargy and infighting among the BJD cadre, slow pace of job creation for youth and an atmosphere of mistrust in the BJD due to the constant churn in its district leadership. Lest complacency sets in and the party gets overconfident, the SWOT analysis had words of caution as well. Foremost among them were Naveen's established pro-poor reputation, his massive network of women self-help groups, possible sympathy for Naveen as 2019 would probably be the last election for the ageing chief minister and a weak Congress in the state, which would invariably result in a two-way contest in Odisha. The study also warned that minority communities could consolidate against the BJP if the party was perceived as being close to forming the government.

Its homework diligently done, the BJP is seeking to match the ruling BJD, step for step, and dominate

the narrative in the state. Every time the ruling party undertakes a programme, the BJP, too, does something around the same time to deflect or appropriate public attention. The day Naveen flagged off his party's campaign to renew contacts with the people from Ekamra in Bhubaneswar, the BJP raised the issue of an unfinished bridge in Naxalite-dominated Malkangiri district and targeted the chief minister, who also holds the portfolio of the works department which has been constructing the bridge since 2000. The day the BJD enforced a bandh over rising petrol prices, the BJP staged its own demonstrations to press for loan waivers for farmers in Odisha.

The high-decibel protests, the BJP feels, will force people to take note of all that Naveen has failed to address during his long rule in a state still known for its poverty and backwardness. Despite the government's public relations blitz about accelerated growth, rapid industrialization and increasing women's empowerment, Odisha is part of the BIMAROU, denoting India's most sick and underdeveloped states, which consist of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh. With 40 per cent of its population consisting of STs and SCs – 23 per cent and 17 per cent, respectively – poverty rules the mostly rural state. Though, as mentioned earlier, poverty levels have dropped significantly under Naveen – some 70 lakh people have been pulled out of poverty during his rule – around half the people in twelve of the state's thirty districts still live below the poverty line. In predominantly tribal districts such as Koraput, Gajapati

and Rayagada, almost 70 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line.

The worst off are the state's STs and SCs. Poverty among SCs in Odisha is supposed to be the highest in the country, and Odisha is second only to Chhattisgarh when it comes to poverty among STs. Naveen may be showering largesse and providing cheap rice at ₹1 a kilo, but that has not eliminated poverty in the state's hinterland. Life is hard in Odisha and it gets harder as one travels farther from the capital. As mentioned earlier, the state can be divided into several regions – coastal, southern, northern, western and central. Bhubaneswar is in the coastal region and unsurprisingly corners most of the government goodies. While 22 per cent of the population in this region lives below the poverty line, the more remote northern and southern regions account for 77 per cent of Odisha's BPL population.

Pockets of poverty are to be found everywhere, including close to the seat of administration in Bhubaneswar. Nagada, a cluster of three villages on a steep hill comprising 61 tribal families in the mineral-rich Sukinda block of Jajpur district, is a little more than 100 kilometres from the state capital. But till recently, the villages had no roads and villagers had to walk four hours to reach the nearest towns in the foothills. Cut off from civilization, the villages were struck by tragedy in 2016 with nineteen children dying of malnutrition in a period of three months – seven of them died in a month.

As always, the media alleged these were hunger deaths, though officials insisted the real cause was a combination

of measles and pneumonia coupled with lack of proper nutrition. Whatever the truth, the resultant bad publicity forced the government to hastily lay roads and also build schools, homes and anganwadi centres in the villages.

Following the makeover, Nagada looks spanking new. But the BJP is convinced that Odisha, blighted by deprivation and misery that the deaths in Nagada brought to the fore once again, provides a fertile ground for the party to sprout and establish roots. Enthusiastic partymen have drawn up an elaborate list, with information mostly culled from replies given by state ministers on the floor of the state assembly, to flag all that is wrong with the state and embarrass the chief minister. According to the state government's own admission on the floor of the House, only 33 per cent of Odisha is under irrigation, though the national average is stated to be 48.9. Out of the 8 lakh children in the state, 22 per cent suffer from malnutrition, while 45,000 of them are severely undernourished. In 2014, there were 2.28 lakh new job applicants, but the government could give jobs only to 1194 of them. Only 2 per cent of rural villages have piped water supply, while 55 lakh families, or 64 per cent, still live in kutchha houses. Some 12,000 villages don't have all-weather roads; 57 per cent of primary health centres have no regular doctors; in community health centres, 87 per cent do not have any specialists; 36 per cent of families have no electricity; and 24,000 posts of teachers at primary and upper primary levels and 13,971 teaching posts at government high schools are vacant. Records also point to a dismal level



of industrialization in the state. Between 2000 and 2015, the state signed 92 MoUs for heavy industries, but work is yet to start in at least 44 of them. The state minister for industries admitted that only 21 medium-scale industries got off the ground between 2000 and 2016, and three of them have closed down since.

A resurgent BJP hopes to ride on Naveen's failures to turn the tables on him. And each time Dharmendra forays deep into the state on his countless roadshows, either to launch a Central government scheme or to welcome a defector or two into his party, he never misses an opportunity to emphasize that a BJP government would be better than a Naveen Patnaik government any day. 'We are the future,' Dharmendra said, surveying the ecstatic crowds that surged around his convoy as he made his way to Pattamundai in Kendrapara district. 'Naveen Babu can only offer more of the same, whereas we are offering change for the better,' he proclaimed, shrugging off the flower petals that supporters had been tossing on him.

In leading the party's offensive, Dharmendra has hit a scorching pace, taking the road ever so often and reaching out to regions across Odisha. But the journey to Pattamundai, the town best known for exporting skilled plumbers the world over, was slow and time-consuming as enthusiastic partymen mobbed his convoy at every turn and welcomed him with hysterical zeal. First at Nischintakoili, then at Salipur, and several other stops, the Central minister's cavalcade was forced to halt as it moved deeper into the district known to be a BJD stronghold.

Giant billboards of a smiling Naveen towered all along the route, promising '*Katha nube, kathina parishram*' (No speeches, only hard work). BJP activists, however, were boisterous and raised a din at the sight of Dharmendra.

The rally that the Central minister addressed in Pattamundai after he made his way through the crowds and the serpentine roads of the town was considered a grand success. This was in spite of an earlier attempt by some miscreants to tear up the BJP posters and damage the hoardings. Thousands crowded a field plastered with posters highlighting the so-called failures of Naveen's government. Pregnant women deliver babies in auto-rickshaws in Odisha, stated one, while others bemoaned the plight of people like Kalahandi's Dana Majhi who had to carry back home the body of his dead wife on his shoulders. There were also posters highlighting the deaths of the children due to alleged malnutrition in Nagada. Referring to the collapse of an under-construction bridge in Bhubaneswar, one poster alleged it had fallen under the weight of corruption. The posters invariably posed a question: '*Eta kana apaprachar?*' (Is this misinformation?) The people seemed convinced, and as Dharmendra railed against the state government he received a rapturous response. On the way back, he was convinced that the political wind had begun to blow in a different direction and was now helping to boost the BJP's appeal. 'Elections are about arithmetic, for sure. But in Odisha the next time, it is also going to be about chemistry,' Dharmendra claimed as his convoy gathered speed and raced through the snaking highway to reach the next rally in another

remote place. The BJP in Odisha believes it is bonding with the people better than ever.



The BJP's rise in Odisha has come at the cost of the Congress, which runs the risk of being further marginalized in a state that it once ruled imperiously. And nowhere is the party's present despondency better displayed than at its organizational headquarters in the heart of Bhubaneswar. The building it owns is prime property. It is bang opposite the railway station, along the spacious road that leads to the state assembly and the secretariat and where Republic Day and Independence Day parades take place. The stretch of the road is also the favourite destination for protesters from all over the state, who gather here almost every day to air their grievances. Sitting amid the din and bustle, the Congress office, located within a spacious compound, is mostly quiet and deserted. On a weekday evening recently, half a dozen men sat on plastic chairs in the lobby, chewing paan and whiling away their time. Rows of office rooms remained locked, silent testimony to the fact that the party no longer had any leaders that could galvanize it into action.

Since being voted out of power in Odisha in 2000, it has only been a downhill journey for the party that once enjoyed considerable sway over a sizeable section of the people, particularly in its poor tribal belts. The party's domination was never total, though, and the Congress party had to lean on regional parties often to form

governments in the past. But in regions such as Koraput and Nowrangpur, inhabitants worshipped Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi to such an extent that only Congress candidates won parliamentary contests from there. Gamang, Odisha's chief minister when the supercyclone struck in 1999, was elected to the Lok Sabha from Koraput no less than nine times – in 1972, 1977, 1980, 1984, 1989, 1991, 1996, 1998 and 2004. Khagapati Pradhani also won nine times from Nowrangpur – in 1967, 1971, 1977, 1980, 1984, 1989, 1991, 1996 and 1998. But the party's heyday long gone, both Koraput and Nowrangpur, as well as most of the other erstwhile Congress strongholds, are currently held by the BJD.

The tragedies that have befallen the Congress in Odisha are many. Its decline as a hegemonic party at the national level has been accompanied by a growing bankruptcy of ideas and leaders at the state level. Former chief minister J.B. Patnaik, who dominated Congress politics in Odisha for decades, had little acceptance among the ordinary people, but enjoyed a high standing among his partymen. Other leaders who came up following Patnaik's death in 2015 have little acceptance among both people and partymen. 'Our current crop of leaders is both faceless and baseless,' scoffed a party worker from Berhampur in Ganjam, referring to the lack of both identity and a mass base among the current set of state leaders. The party does try to change office-bearers and nominate a new president from time to time to infuse fresh blood and reinvigorate itself. But no one has made any difference to the party's fortunes. When the party yielded ground to Naveen

Patnaik in 2000, J.B. Patnaik was the Pradesh Congress Committee president. Thereafter Sarat Patnaik, an MP from western Odisha, held the position of president from 2001 to 2004, before J.B. Patnaik replaced him again for a brief while. Jaydev Jena, an ex-minister, then became the PCC chief until former Central minister and member of Dhenkanal royalty, K.P. Singh Deo, was made the president in 2009. In 2011, Niranjan Patnaik, a relative of J.B. Patnaik, was made the chief. In 2013, he made way for Jaydev Jena, who held the position for a year. In 2014, Prasad Harichandan became the chief and remained in the position until early 2018, when Niranjan Patnaik took over the party reins once again.

The procession of presidents has not taken the party anywhere. If anything, the game of musical chairs has heightened factionalism within the party. As long as Harichandan was the party chief, he kept promising to turn around the party by expanding its base and regaining the lost aura. 'We are a bit down, but not out. Congress as a party will bounce back in Odisha,' Harichandan insisted. Niranjan Patnaik, the new president, is continuing with similar bluster. But not many, including those in his own party, are swayed. Despite the recent change of guard at the top, everyone is convinced that factionalism will stay. The Congress will also be plagued by the lack of a credible and popular face, leaving it, for all practical purposes, rudderless in the state.

The party's vote share in Odisha, meanwhile, has shrunk alarmingly. In 2000, when it was voted out by Naveen Patnaik's BJD, the Congress had secured 33.78

per cent of the votes, winning 26 of the 147 assembly seats. In 2004, it did marginally better, winning 34.82 per cent of the vote and 38 seats. But by 2009, the gains had been frittered away and the Congress got only 29.1 per cent of the vote and won just 27 seats. In 2014, its vote share shrank further to 25.7 per cent and it got only 16 assembly seats. Party insiders say the Congress's dwindling vote share is symptomatic of its shrinking role in the state's political narrative. Between 2004 and 2014, the Congress headed the UPA government in Delhi but failed to make a mark in Odisha. It did not bring up any new leader and relying as it did on the same set of leaders associated with the largely discredited Congress governments of the past, its promises of providing a better alternative rang hollow. In fact, according to Sanjaya Baru's *Accidental Prime Minister*, when Naveen, then still in an alliance with the BJP, asked Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for a special package for Odisha on the lines that the UPA had granted to its ally in Bihar, Singh put him down with rare brutality, saying, 'Does money grow on trees?'

From 2009, hapless Congressmen began deserting the party to join the BJD in search of greener pastures. Already bereft of a leader and a talking point, the party got a further jolt before the 2014 elections when Bhupinder Singh, the leader of the Congress legislative party and leader of the opposition, switched sides and went over to the BJD. The high-profile defection dealt a deadly blow to the party, depleting morale even before a single vote had been cast in the elections.

Rahul Gandhi has visited Odisha several times, but has not been embraced by any group in the entire state. Each time he tours the state, he addresses rallies, but leaves no lasting impression. Lack of a credible leader at the state level complicates matters further.

The panchayat polls of 2017 reconfirmed the rapid slide of the Congress in the state. The party managed to secure only an embarrassing 18.04 per cent of the votes and was relegated to the third spot by the BJP, which won 33.03 per cent against the BJD's 40.81 per cent. But most Congressmen are not shocked by the panchayat poll outcome. According to them, the party, busy in internecine factional feuds, has long ceased to be politically relevant in Odisha. Whatever chance it had of a revival, if and when Naveen Patnaik became unpopular, was snatched away by the BJP. Post 2014, the saffron party has come to occupy much of the opposition space and the Congress finds itself on the sidelines, struggling to stay relevant.

'If one has to do politics in Odisha, one has to be either with the BJD or the BJP. Being with the Congress is suicidal,' admitted a Congressman who had contested the last assembly elections and had come a distant third. While the BJD was the earlier preferred destination for party deserters, hundreds are leaving for the BJP since 2014. Lalatendu Bidyadhar Mohapatra, who died prematurely in 2016, was an influential Congress leader and a former legislator, popular among the younger rank and file of the party. A year later, his daughter Upasna, together with thousands of loyalists, joined the BJP at

a rally presided over by Dharmendra. Politics, after all, is about gaining power and the Congress has long lost its attraction as a party that can guarantee or even help win an election. Many Congress partymen, therefore, are choosing to align themselves with political parties that promise better electoral dividends.

Those staying back in the Congress are mostly incurable loyalists such as Subhash Chandra Samatasinghar of Nimapada in Puri district. '*Hatha thiley bhata khaibo*' (I will eat only if I have a hand), said Samatasinghar, referring to the Congress symbol to convey his undying loyalty to the party. There are also some who will not be accepted into their fold either by the BJD or by the BJP, and are therefore in the Congress.



For the time being, the 2019 electoral battle seems to be a head-to-head contest between Naveen's BJD and the BJP with Dharmendra as its most publicized face, and both sides are working overtime to drive home the point that they would best serve the state. Naveen and his partymen have fallen back on his image and achievements, including his raft of welfare schemes, to reconnect with the voters. Stung by the setback suffered in the 2017 panchayat polls, the normally reserved chief minister has opened up and begun posing for selfies with school and college students à la Narendra Modi. The selfies taken make their way to the next day's newspapers. In an attempt to bridge



the distance that exists between him and the people he rules, Naveen took giant steps when, during a visit to Berhampur, he walked down to the local panipuri vendor to savour a few delicacies in full public view.

In brushing up his image, no efforts are being spared. An English weekly carried Naveen on its cover and a rare interview inside, giving him good publicity and sparing him the tough questions. Tens of thousands of residents of Bhubaneswar and beyond woke up one day to find a copy of the magazine slipped under their front door, free of cost. Who ordered the copies and who paid for them remains a mystery. Barely a few weeks later, the chief minister was awarded a prize by the *Outlook* weekly for the good work done by him and this time the BJD took to the streets more openly to beat the drum for the chief minister's achievement. When Naveen returned to the state after receiving the award in Delhi, thousands turned up at the airport to greet him and accompany him home in a victory procession. Giant posters of the chief minister went up across the state capital.

In between, Naveen also created a record of sorts when he sought to buff up his reputation further by invoking his legendary father's name. A coffee-table book, looking at the life and times of Biju Patnaik, was launched in January 2018 amid a lot of fanfare. Huge billboards announcing the book's publication dotted Bhubaneswar, while a horde of VIPs, including former president Pranab Mukherjee, former prime minister Deve Gowda and BJP patriarch L.K. Advani, attended the launch. The ceremony went down as a rare book launch where the author, one Sundar

Ganesan, found no place on the dais. Instead, Naveen and the dignitaries were the focus of the show.

For Dharmendra, matching Naveen's image, charisma, credibility and the perception of being incorruptible will be an uphill task. For one, Naveen built his image over years and the BJP minister cannot simply expect to acquire the same overnight. More importantly, what attracted Odias to Naveen the most was that he came with no baggage, had no family and friends to look after, and was not like a normal, discredited politician. Dharmendra has a problem on these counts. Unlike Naveen, Dharmendra was born and raised in Odisha and has family and friends there. He knows thousands of partymen intimately. There is no evidence to suggest that the union minister is any less honest than the chief minister, but the BJD has subtly begun to target him for his connections. The raid on his brother's gas agency, it is believed, was to remind residents that the potential chief ministerial candidate may not be as unencumbered as the current incumbent.

With the next big elections not far off, the battle for one-upmanship has turned unrelenting and unforgiving. As both sides make a desperate bid for power, Naveen finds himself caught in the middle of it, even though he is not in the best of health. Besides his age, his sedentary lifestyle and chain smoking seem to have taken a toll. He walks gingerly and moves slowly. His spondylitis also acts up from time to time, restricting free movement and sometimes getting so painful that it hurts him even to smile. But aides say the chief minister is fighting fit

for another bruising electoral contest. Dharmendra, meanwhile, is keeping himself combat-ready with yoga lessons from a guru who teaches no less than the prime minister. His age, 48 years, against Naveen's 72, is also in his favour. The battle for 2019 promises to be a test of guile, image and stamina.



6

What after Naveen?



A domestic worker in Bhubaneswar, Kesari Barik, stopped in her tracks and dropped on to her knees, horrified by the images relayed on a local television channel.

It was 15 August 2017, and Odisha's numerous regional television channels were broadcasting live the Independence Day celebrations, presided over by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik. Police bands played patriotic tunes and marchers clicked their heels as they paraded down the wide Bhubaneswar road with precision. Everything was going according to plan until Naveen rose to address the gathering. As television cameras zoomed and focused on the chief minister, significantly puffy with age, Naveen stood still. No words came out of his mouth and he seemed to sway a little. Small beads of sweat surfaced on his broad forehead and it was clear that he was sick. Naveen twitched a bit and turned a little, but he continued to be in a trance. The staff hovering nearby stepped in and helped Naveen to take a seat. The chief minister's car was called and he was whisked away, with the Independence Day celebrations far from over.

The sight of a groggy, unsteady, visibly unwell Naveen

stoked afresh a debate that has engaged the average Odia for quite some time: Is Naveen Patnaik's health all right?

After whisking him away from the Independence Day parade venue, the chief minister's staff was quick to dispel escalating doubts about Naveen's health. He is absolutely fine, a communiqué said. Officials insisted Naveen's indisposition during the celebrations was just a simple case of dehydration – he had not had water for some time. 'There is nothing to worry about,' they said.

But for Kesari Barik, the domestic help, the slightest hint of Naveen's ill-health triggered a panic attack. Kesari isn't a BJD party worker. But like thousands of women in Odisha, she is a silent supporter who steps out to vote for Naveen in every election. Even idle talk about the health of the 1946-born chief minister fills her with uncertainty about the future. '*Kan heba Naveen chali gala pare?*' (What will happen if Naveen goes away?) is a common question among many like Kesari in the state.

Speculation about what the future holds in a post-Naveen scenario has gained momentum since 2011, when reports of a 'lonely' chief minister betraying behavioural changes and often losing his temper began emanating from behind the high walls of Naveen Niwas. Officials, however, scotched the reports as baseless, saying the chief minister had a nasty fall in his house and the resultant pain had made him depressed. They insist medical check-ups done almost every two months have thrown up no particular health worries for the chief minister. The officials are worried, though, that Naveen continues to smoke heavily.



The clarifications have not dispelled the doubts, and speculations around Naveen's health vary wildly depending upon who you ask. To his fawning fans, Naveen is as fit as he could be at his age. To his critics, he is a dead man walking, suffering from cirrhosis of the liver following years of unregulated drinking. There are also those who claim, as always without any evidence, that the chief minister's kidneys have failed and that he is on dialysis.

The claims and counter-claims about Naveen's health could have been great entertainment if so much was not at stake. Whatever anyone's views on Naveen and his time as chief minister may be, there is no denying that during his long stint in power, he has touched the lives of every single person living in Odisha in more ways than one. His well-being, therefore, has a direct bearing on the state, his party and the people. What happens to Odisha once Naveen exits? Will his BJD survive without him? And will it be advantage BJP with Naveen no more around to checkmate it?

These are all subjects of conjecture. What is certain is that when Naveen exits the political stage – voluntarily or involuntarily – he will leave behind a huge vacuum. Of course, there are people who say that Naveen isn't in the same league as his father Biju Patnaik and therefore will not be missed as much. The elder Patnaik was a statesman and charismatic. On the contrary, reclusive and reticent, Naveen has only mastered the art of staying in power. Though he has mass appeal, he may not have captured the people's imagination to the degree his legendary

father did. In addition, Naveen, unlike his father, has never been in the opposition or spent time in political wilderness. Even when out of power, the elder Patnaik still carried clout and enjoyed the unflinching loyalty of his supporters, who moved with their leader from one party to another. The same cannot be said of Naveen. True, crowds invariably gather around him. But how much of the crowd is because of personal devotion to him and how much for a share of the benefits from the power his position allows is yet to be seen.

By virtue of being Odisha's longest-serving chief minister, Naveen will certainly be remembered by posterity. His position in history is guaranteed. The same, however, cannot be said for his party. Its future seems uncertain. In the event of Naveen, the glue, bowing out, the ruling party in its current form will not be around for long. Can the party survive without Naveen? Or will it disintegrate? Or will the BJP, given its might and resources, swallow it?

It is difficult to hazard a guess about what will happen in the future in view of so many imponderables. A post-Naveen scenario is definitely full of possibilities. Can another member of the Patnaik clan step in to stake claim over the legacy and keep the party together? A family takeover at this juncture may look unrealistic and impractical. Naveen is seventy-two and his siblings, Prem and Gita, are older than him. If age is not on Naveen's side, it does not help the cause of his brother and sister either. With both Prem and Gita virtually ruled out, what about Arun Patnaik, Prem's son and Naveen's nephew?

As mentioned earlier, Odias caught a rare glimpse of this young man with shoulder-length hair sometime in 2015 when he came down, along with Naveen and Prem, to Cuttack to gift Anand Bhawan, the birthplace of Biju Patnaik, to the state for being converted into a museum. His sight sparked instant speculation on a possible succession some day. Sycophants within the party such as state minister Pradeep Maharathy enthusiastically embraced the idea, saying the young man would be more than welcome in the party. Doubting Thomases scoffed at the idea, saying he was a stranger to Odisha and unfit to rule the state. Arun, on his part, appeared to speak from a prepared script. 'I have no intention of joining politics right now,' he told newsmen, hot on his heels as if they were chasing a celebrity.

Arun Patnaik's unequivocal statement that he was not joining politics 'right now' led to a temporary suspension of the animated speculation. But what if he decides to join some time? If Naveen is to vacate his position, there will definitely be a wave of sympathy for the Patnaiks that the younger Arun can hope to tap into. Remember the sympathy wave that Naveen rode when he contested the parliamentary by-poll from Aska in 1997 or when he fought the state assembly elections in 2000? Sympathy will certainly be a factor in the immediate wake of Naveen's departure. Whether Arun Patnaik decides to ride it by becoming the leader of the rudderless BJD, only time will tell.

Joining politics and laying claim over the Patnaik legacy will be the easier part of the deal, if Naveen's

nephew decides to throw his hat into the ring. Succeeding and surviving for a long time like his uncle will be by far the tougher challenge. When Naveen joined as a beginner, his senior party colleagues were confident of using and discarding him. But Naveen outsmarted them all with his guile and today the seniors have been cut down to size to such an extent that they barely matter. Can Arun, if he decides to take the leap, repeat Naveen's feat? Can he get the better of everyone else just as his uncle did?

In matching up to Naveen's reputation or his enviable record, the younger Patnaik will also need luck – loads of it, in fact. Naveen being accepted by the locals to rule Odisha without knowing Odia has been no less than a miracle. The impossible was made possible since Odisha was adrift and Odias were desperate for a saviour. It didn't matter in those desperate times which language the saviour spoke as long as his intentions were noble. One must say Naveen was more than lucky to make his political debut in those extraordinary times. The non-Odia-speaking chief minister ruled Odisha, ironically the first province to be carved out on linguistic lines way back in 1936, without hurting local sensibilities. From time to time, political opponents derided him for this inability and attempted to embarrass him. But it all ended right there and went no further. A law enacted by an earlier Congress government in the 1950s stipulated that all government business must be transacted in Odia. But the law stipulated no punitive measures for anyone not complying with the provisions, and in its absence, no

one really bothered to follow what was laid down in the law. Naveen's administration also did not.

Fortunately for the chief minister, the importance of language has diminished considerably since the time Odia played the role of a unifier after the creation of Odisha state. The state's large ST population does not necessarily speak Odia. They have their own tribal languages and converse in Odia only when required to communicate with outsiders. There is also no common version of Odia which is spoken across the state and dialects differ from region to region. The language is also believed to have failed to develop as a vehicle for imparting modern-day knowledge. Priorities have changed and jobs and services are on the top of everyone's mind. Odias remain a proud people, but Odia has slipped in their priority and has ceased to evoke the chauvinism that Tamil or Marathi does among its speakers. That language was no more an emotive issue allowed Naveen to establish himself in Odisha, where according to a 1994 law, written and spoken knowledge of Odia is a must for contesting gram panchayat elections. It was Naveen's luck that the knowledge of the local language wasn't mandatory for the state's highest elected position. Though unqualified to be a lowly gram panchayat member, he has had no problem in continuing as the chief minister.

But miracles cannot be banked upon for political success all the time and it is impractical to believe that Arun Patnaik will be as lucky a politician as his uncle. Odisha may well be less benevolent and indulgent towards

him. Perhaps, he may lack the cunning that a successful politician such as his uncle has in abundance. Perhaps he will only remain a transient curiosity and will lose his significance once the sympathy dries up. Or maybe, he is simply not interested in politics and does not see himself permanently shifting base to Odisha.

Nothing can be ruled out, though. A lot would depend on the timing of the transition, when the baton would have to be passed, and the outcome of the 2019 polls. What if the BJD wins a handsome majority and then Naveen leaves the scene midway into his next term? In such a situation, with numbers on its side, it is unlikely the ruling BJD will dissipate overnight in the absence of its supreme leader. True, the party suffers from a terrible lack of internal democracy and no other party leader was ever allowed to grow in stature. When it came to internal democracy or the lack of it, the party rivalled J. Jayalalithaa's AIADMK, both with unquestioned leaders surrounded by partymen who could be best described as political pygmies. However feebly the top leader spoke, his or her voice could drown out the collective voice of the partymen. In Tamil Nadu's AIADMK and Odisha's BJD, only the supreme leader mattered. The rest were inconsequential.

There is every possibility that a post-Naveen scenario would resemble the post-Jayalalithaa events currently playing out in Tamil Nadu. Driven by their survival instincts, party MLAs will elect someone non-controversial among them to succeed as the chief minister. Since the chosen individual may not have the standing

or the necessary acumen to carry everyone along, chances are that partymen will bicker and split. The legislators' strong desire to hang on to power will result in desperate bids to bury the differences and run the government with the purpose of buying time. But if the BJP ends up with a sizeable tally of seats in 2019, say, 40 or more in a House of 147, time may not be on the side of the BJD. A resurgent BJP will find a rudderless BJD an easy prey to be poached, split and swallowed.

There is also the possibility that some politicians could come together to initiate another regional experiment. If the BJD is to lose steam minus Naveen, and if the BJP is to assert itself, there will always be a section of local leaders who will try to carve out a niche for themselves in the changing situation. Many such leaders are sitting idle currently, in various political parties or outside them, waiting in the wings for an opportune moment to set out on a new course. A new regional party with a new face and a new slogan could just click as an alternative to the rising BJP.

So all eyes, for the moment, are on the 2019 polls and what its outcome will be. Going by a renowned astrologer from Paralakhemundi of Odisha's southern Gajapati district, Naveen and his party will win hands down again. But why should anyone go by what an astrologer says? Former top aides to Naveen Patnaik, however, say one must, since the man is no ordinary astrologer.

Soon after Naveen had taken over as the chief minister in 2000, the astrologer, now dead, had been called over to pore over his horoscope and help with information about

what the future portended. The astrologer made several predictions, including that Naveen will win all elections between 2000 and 2019. Not a great believer in what the stars foretell, the chief minister heard the predictions but did not react. It's a different matter that the astrologer was proven correct again and again. Naveen won the elections in 2004, 2009 and 2014.

But will the astrologer's prediction for 2019 be correct as well? And how did the astrologer know, way back in 2000, that there would be elections in 2019? Assembly elections are normally held every five years. Going by that, Odisha ought to have had elections in 2020. But Naveen had unexpectedly advanced the 2005 elections by a year to 2004 and that now has brought forward the next assembly elections to 2019.

Having rightly predicted that the elections will be held in 2019, could the astrologer have been right in predicting a Naveen victory, too? Senior aides of the chief minister have their fingers crossed as the fate of one of the country's most successful politicians hangs in balance. Odisha is unlikely to see a politician like Naveen in quite a while. Besides experiencing a steady sense of political stability, the state has also gained a lot from the civility that the quiet and reserved chief minister brought to its public life. Whether Odisha has changed for the better under his long reign is yet to be ascertained, with compelling arguments made for and against.

Without doubt, the chief minister has come to acquire a very high stature. His achievements have been truly remarkable. He made mincemeat of battle-hardened



political rivals despite having no prior experience. He systematically captured power, and survived for almost two decades. The records Naveen has set are enviable, by any standards. If he wins in 2019, he will scale further heights and become a far bigger political phenomenon. If he loses, he will still remain a phenomenon, hard to emulate.

Naveen Patnaik, the politician, is hard to match, after all.



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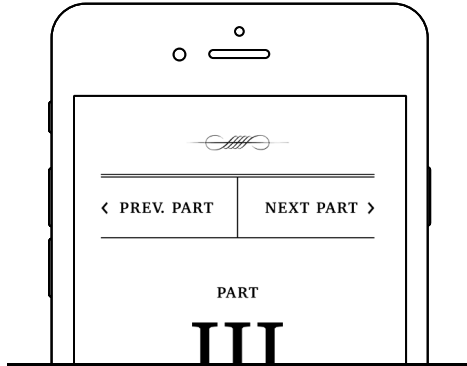
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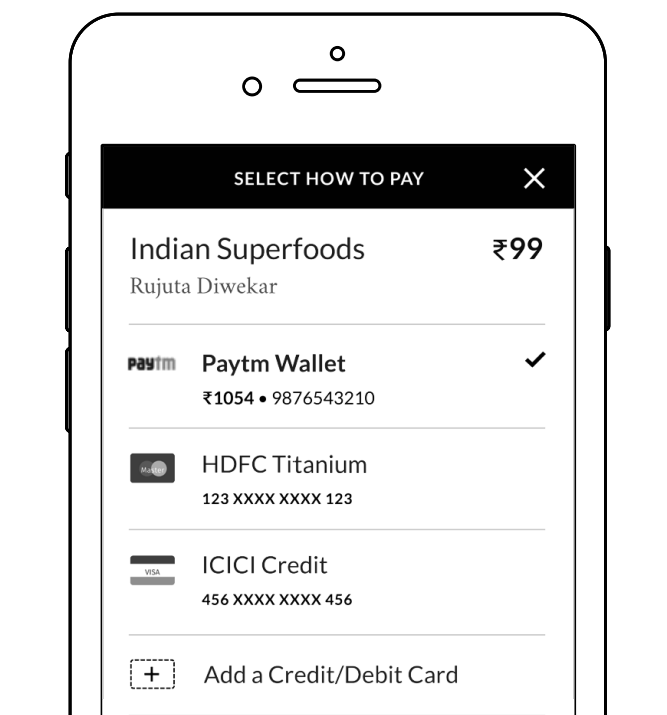
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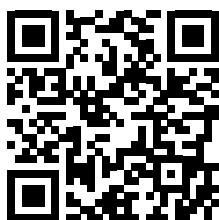
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